

**Kieli, Vol. 9: The
Dead Sleep
Eternally in the
Wilderness (Part 2)**

Kabei, Yukako

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KIELI

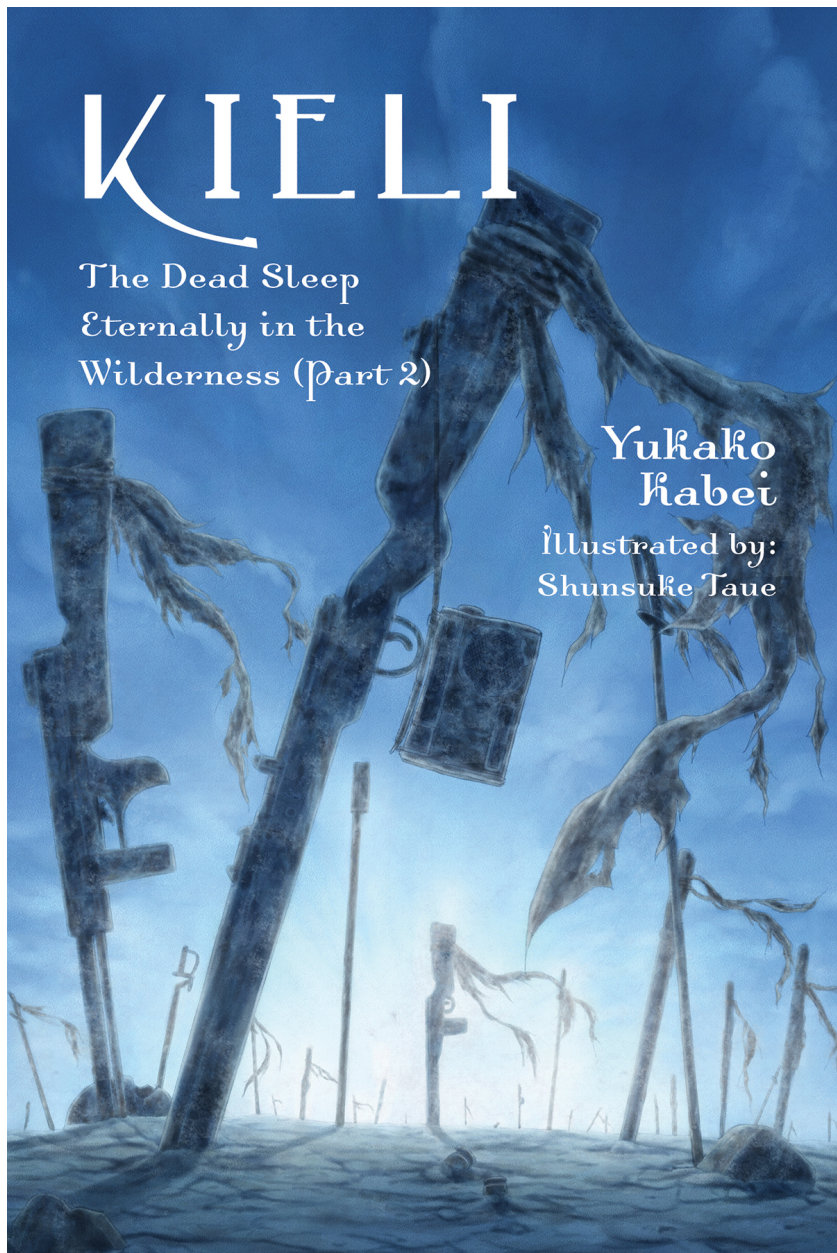
Yukako Habei

KIELI

The Dead Sleep
Eternally in the
Wilderness (part 2)

Yukako
Kabei

Illustrated by:
Shunsuke Taue



KIELI The Dead Sleep Eternally in the Wilderness (part 2)

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WHEN BEGINNING IS BORN FROM ENDING

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THE DEAD SLEEP ETERNALLY IN THE WILDERNESS

COLLECTION OF INITIAL ROUGH CHARACTER SKETCHES



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CHAPTER 1: A MOMENT OF SILENCE AT THE CHOCOLATE BAR GRAVE

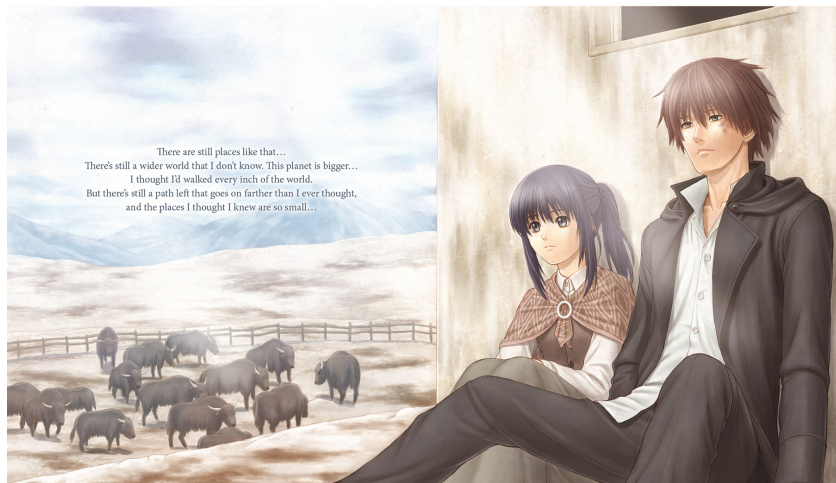
CHAPTER 2: CONCRETE GUM TASTES LIKE CATS

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There are still places like that ...
There's still a wider world that I don't know. This planet is bigger...
I thought I'd walked every inch of the world.
But there's still a path left that goes on farther than I ever thought,
and the places I thought I knew are so small...



KIELI

The Dead Sleep Eternally in the Wilderness (part 2)



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Kieli: The Dead Sleep Eternally in the Wilderness (Part 2)
YUKAKO KABEI

Translation by Sarah Alys Lindholm

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CHAPTER 6

WHEN BEGINNING IS BORN FROM
ENDING

Back then, living hadn't had any meaning. Every so often, without any warning or any real reason, he'd even caught himself thinking, "Maybe I'll try dying." He'd had one foot in the world of the dead, and yet the other foot had been chained to the world of the living, and he couldn't pull it out; he'd just looked on disinterestedly, sort of like it was all happening on the other side of some window, as the dull, vague world passed him by. Never making any move to walk out into it himself.

Somewhere along the way, though, he'd stopped thinking about trying to die. He wondered when that had happened.

Somehow, on this stagnant, screwed-up planet hazy with gray smog and clouds of sand that was only inching closer and closer to its extinction, he still bumped into people now and then who were trying to live strong and true even though they were just weak humans. People with that kind of vitality had reached out their hands to him. It was thanks to them that he never had chucked it after all.

On his way down the spiral staircase, as he was just on the verge of tripping, thanks to his narrowed field of vision, he caught sight of a petite girl standing a few steps below him. Her fair white face was anxious as she looked up at him, hugging the radio. Her long black hair and her outfit, a black bolero jacket and skirt that reminded him of when he'd first met her, melted into near invisibility in the darkness of the tower. However, her white skin stood out against the gloom, if faintly, like pale snatches of light. At the sight of her, this girl he never lost sight of even in darkness, his face broke into a small, unbidden smile.

"And Joachim...?" the girl asked, looking worried.

"Mm. Dead."

His tone of voice sounded weirdly casual even to his own ears, as if he might as well be talking about tomorrow's weather. Harvey sighed as he continued. "I'm glad the jerk is finally dead and out of my hair. And he probably wouldn't have liked surviving in that messed-up body, anyway. He was always hanging around me making trouble and getting in my way all the damn time, and then he went and died without even answering my questions, that stupid...bas...tard..." He was blabbering, saying more than he needed to, and then for some reason his voice just trailed away. In

the end, the words broke off and Harvey dropped his gaze to his feet.

White hands settled lightly on either side of his face. Delicate, cool hands. When he raised his gaze, he saw her biting her lip as if to stifle something.

Oh, Harvey thought. Maybe she was wearing his feelings for him.

What did he want?

He mindlessly reached out with his left hand and began groping around uncertainly in the darkness, until she caught it gently in her own right hand.

“Are you okay?”

“...Uh-huh. Yeah.” He hung his head and rested his brow on the soft black hair spilling over her shoulder.

What was the difference between me and that guy? What made our paths split off? I think he was another me who traveled a different path. A me who never met someone to take my hand when I reach out. That's what he was. This girl's hand had anchored him to the world of the living all this time. Without her hand, I might've lopped off my own arm like that, too. Just like him, without even hesitating. I might've ended my world with my own hands without a second's hesitation.

What was he trying to do? What did he want—?

“He's a stupid bastard,” Harvey muttered without lifting his head. His voice sounded a little hoarse.

Episode 1: Jude

“Oh hello. Nice to meet you,” were Harvey’s first words to Father Sigri when he woke up. Then they just stared blankly at each other for a while, as if neither of them was sure the words fit the situation, and the whole atmosphere went kind of silly. And as for Kieli, she went rigid, cheeks flaming.

Wasn’t that greeting just too...too normal, somehow?

The man Harvey was talking to was a member of the Council of Elders, which made him one of the natural enemies of all Undyings. With his authority, his very next words might be orders to have Harvey killed—for all they knew, he’d killed tons of Harvey’s brethren already! But at times like these, Harvey’s lack of any hang-ups about people who did him wrong tended to make him say ditzzy things like this.

Then Sigri recovered himself and said, with such a tangled mixture of feelings on his face that Kieli couldn’t even begin to sort them out, “I see. So you’re the...”

You’re the _____. There were all sorts of ways for that sentence to end. All sorts of meanings simmering below the surface.

“Yes, that’s me.”

And, as usual, Harvey’s response wasn’t quite normal. The radio let out some exasperated-sounding static, and Kieli was so unbearably uncomfortable that she stayed silent and stared at the floor. She was still at the same fixed distance from Sigri she’d been maintaining all along.

Sigri sat up. He looked as if he was still in pain, but he lightly waved off the hand Harvey reached out to support him with and arranged himself with his back leaning against the wall. “Well, it seems I owe you a lot. I have to thank you.”

“That...!”

Hearing Sigri say *that*, Kieli’s feelings erupted inside her and in a flash she’d lifted her head and cut in. “Th-that’s not enough to make us forgive you! It’s not...that ea...sy...” When she noticed

Harvey giving her a scolding look, all those feelings deflated like a balloon, and she quickly faltered. Sigri clammed up again, too, looking apologetic. A strained silence fell over the tower.

Harvey eased the tension by plopping his hand lightly on Kieli's head and standing up.

"Let's get moving. Can you walk? I'll give you a hand."

"Yes, thank you..." Sigri took Harvey's proffered hand and got to his feet, and then began making his way down the steps with Harvey's shoulder supporting him. Slipping the radio around her neck again, Kieli stood up, too, and followed them on leaden feet.

I'm sorry, Corporal, she silently apologized. She hugged the radio to her chest as she plodded along, bringing up the rear. Self-loathing weighed heavily on her heart. She'd quickly realized why Harvey, who hardly ever got angry with her, had given her that scolding look.

He wasn't being considerate of Sigri, she thought, so much as he was getting angry on the Corporal's behalf. For all he was totally insensitive most of the time, sometimes he could be strangely considerate about stuff nobody else noticed.

The Corporal'd had a daughter once, too. If a father got that kind of rejection from his daughter...If he heard words like that from a daughter lashing out at her father...the Corporal was sure to feel sad.

And yet, at the same time, she couldn't open her heart to Sigri, and she just couldn't control that part of herself. Her heart was ugly, filled with something thick and black.

The radio's horribly warped speaker didn't produce real words anymore. It must be pretty much a miracle that the Corporal was still in there at all. Of course Kieli hadn't blamed Harvey, but Harvey seemed to think it was his fault. He was always attentive to the radio now, listening for any faint static. For some reason, Harvey could apparently hear the Corporal's words in the static that just sounded like meaningless noise to her.

Why couldn't Kieli hear it...?

Corporal, come on, say something to me, too...

She wanted him to give her a good scolding in that same old rough tone of his. She wanted him to lead her down the right path in the same old clear and simple way he always gave his opinions. It just felt as if that would clear up all these clouds in her heart in no time...Because as far as Kieli was concerned, the Corporal was

her guardian, and he always would be. Forget about some father she'd known for only a few days and wasn't close to. She still wanted the Corporal.

They reached the bottom of the tower's spiral staircase, went back out into the colonnade they'd come from, and had just entered some other tower Kieli didn't really know anything about when she saw a group of people come running toward them. The figure in the lead, attended by a group of Security Forces soldiers, wasn't in the usual priest's clothes, but rather in the more youthful, simpler seminary school uniform.

"Good, I've been looking for you."

"Yo."

"Lord Sigri, I'm glad you're all right."

"Yes. Good man, Julius. What's the situation?"

The greetings the boy exchanged with Harvey and Sigri were about as brief as it got, but Kieli could still hear the mutual trust in them. Then he turned toward her and gave a somewhat uncomfortable, shy smile. It was the first time they'd seen each other since Kieli had pushed him away after he'd been nice enough to come visit her in the room they'd assigned her.

"Kieli, I'm glad you're okay."

"Yeah...thanks..." Kieli answered softly, equally uncomfortable. She didn't quite meet his eye. There was a tiny pause where both of them seemed to be waiting for the other to say something, but in the end the conversation never went any further than that.

Julius took the injured Sigri from Harvey, briskly ordered a nearby soldier to see to his treatment, and then fell into step beside Harvey as he explained the current situation. Kieli trailed silently after them, feeling as though she was the only one being left out of things, unable to even join the conversation.

Apparently the Security Forces were using this tower as their on-site disaster headquarters. In the wide entranceway scores of soldiers came and went, treating the wounded and replenishing the weapons stores and doing all sorts of things. Everyone was working busily. They were led to the command center set up in a room upstairs, where Julius spread out a big blueprint of Church headquarters on the table. According to his brief summary of things, headquarters had been completely cut off from the outside world by the roaming monsters surrounding it, and the Security Forces squads were now split up into two groups: the ones within

the Church campus and the ones out in the city.

"Where's the energy tower?" Harvey asked, giving the map a quick once-over.

"Energy tower? Right here; why?" Julius answered, pointing to a big circular section in just about the center of the Church headquarters facilities.

"Did you know an unexploded bomb dug up over in Westerbury got brought here?"

"I've heard about it, but not the details...What about it?" Julius asked, giving him a quizzical look. Gazing down at the map, Harvey began speaking quickly.

"I'll skip the details, but the fossil fuel inside that bomb is creating this magnetic field that affects them...and me. I'm betting it's what made them all come out and start rampaging all of a sudden."

"So does that mean all we have to do is take care of the unexploded bomb?"

"Well, it won't magically solve everything. I'm pretty sure we're past that point."

"Then what do we do?"

"Hell if I know. Don't look at me."

Their exchange was a bit over Kieli's head. She let it flow in one ear and out the other, thinking about how she was the only one here in the dark about everything. She thought Harvey and Julius were amazing for blending right in with the soldiers and exchanging conversation with them on equal terms. It irritated her so much how at this time when they all had to work together to get the situation under control somehow, she was the only one who wasn't useful for anything, who built a wall between herself and everyone else and just stood there doing nothing. And she was disappointed in herself, too.

Kieli left them alone and went out into the hallway, just carrying the radio.

She wandered aimlessly among the bulky soldiers' busy traffic, hunching her shoulders. Eventually she found a little window on the staircase landing, which was relatively deserted, and she stood at it and let the wind from outside hit her face. The smells of soot, oil, and gunpowder smoke mixed thickly together in the dry mountain wind. About twelve hours had passed since the commotion began. The sky beyond the mountain peaks was stained

with sunset, and the jagged range was beginning to sink into darkness. The heavens burned so red they looked like flames ready to burn out the monsters. When the sun set and it got harder to see outside, the people were sure to be at a disadvantage, and they'd be in even more difficult circumstances than they were now.

Every single one of them was uneasy. Some of them were taking up arms, and some of them were cowering in corners trying to make no sound, but all of them were waiting for the night that was about to begin.

Oooo...nn...

A low groan made the tower's outer walls vibrate.

Was that groaning wind from the mountain range really the wailing of the *failures*?

"Kieli," said a hesitant voice behind her. She turned around to look without taking her hands off the window frame. Standing there was the boy who'd grown so much taller and more mature than Kieli in the six months since they'd last seen each other in Gate Town.

Looking a little uncomfortable, he scratched the back of his head and then bobbed it in a quick bow. "Um, I'm sorry about before."

"Juli, you don't have to apologize for that; I was the one who..."

But her protest got stuck in her throat halfway through and sort of fizzled out. *I'm the one who did something wrong; I'm sorry...* Kieli was irritated with herself. The words were right there in her mind; why couldn't she be like him and just come right out and apologize?

Maybe it was because of the envy and jealousy of Julius that had taken root in her somewhere along the way. That boy who'd still been smaller than her when they'd first met on the Sand Ocean, and a bit of a spoiled rich kid, and a rascal who was always making his dead mother worry—that boy had gotten so tall and grown-up now, joining all the adults and giving his opinions like an equal. He was taking the lead in doing things to protect the capital, protect the people.

Meanwhile Kieli, his elder, was left eating his dust. Look at her, all tied in knots over her father problem and still being wishy-washy about it.

"Um, look, we're...still friends, right?" he asked reluctantly.

"Of course!" Kieli cried eagerly without thinking. "I mean, if you're not mad at me..."

"Of course I'm not mad. You've had a really rough time."

Julius's frank smile as he said that made Kieli's own lips lift in a smile, too. They met each other's eyes and smiled together, and confirming that she hadn't lost this precious friend yet lifted just a little of the weight bearing down on Kieli's shoulders. Because she knew she really, honestly did find Julius amazing, and she really did want to cheer him on. It relieved her that she could think that way.

Then Julius dropped his gaze to the floor, darting just a brief glance up at her through his lashes as if he was wrestling with his next words.

"So...by 'friends,' um, you really do just mean 'friends,' don't you...?"

"Uh-huh?" Kieli blinked for a few moments, confused by the question, and then piped up with a sunny smile, "Of course! We're really friends!"

Julius's shoulders slumped until his head hung a full ninety degrees onto his chest. As Kieli was starting to get flustered, wondering if she'd said something wrong, he gave her a sort of drained smile.

"Well, I guess it doesn't matter...I can't win anyway," he muttered to himself. Just then, someone came up behind him and gave his head a good shove.

"No hitting on her behind my back."

"I haven't been!" Julius cried, cradling the back of his head as he turned around. He looked from Harvey, who stood glaring sort of overbearingly down at him from his higher vantage point, to Kieli, who was just bewildered. Then he *hmped* irritably, though she wasn't really sure why.

"Julius, sir. We've managed to contact your father," broke in a soldier's voice from the head of the stairs.

"Okay." Julius nodded. He shoved Harvey back with one elbow and then actually stuck out his tongue at him before jogging back up the staircase. Kieli watched him go. Something about the fact that the little rascal part of him wasn't really gone after all reassured her.

And then she noticed that she was alone with Harvey now, which made her uncomfortable for its own reasons, so she quickly

dropped her gaze from his in a way that probably looked kind of suspicious. Her own knees beneath the black skirt and petticoat caught her eye. It was almost as if the moment she'd put on these clothes that were so much like her old Easterbury boarding school uniform, she'd actually gone back to being that fourteen-year-old girl. Right now she was wandering restlessly through all the years between fourteen and seventeen: trying to be an adult and act brave, then going back to being a kid when she couldn't quite manage it. She kept bouncing back and forth.

Kieli looked up through her eyelashes and observed the man standing in front of her. The everyday church clothes that Harvey was wearing were black, too; you might even say they matched Kieli's. Priest's robes, with a high collar and a long hem, and they fit him perfectly (although he'd unbuttoned the collar and was wearing them pretty sloppily). He also had a heavy-looking carbonization gun on his left shoulder that he'd gotten from somewhere or other.

When he noticed Kieli looking, Harvey blinked his eyes, the copper and dark brown not quite reflecting the light the same way, and then said, "Oh, this. It doesn't suit me?" He looked down at his clothes, tugging at his collar a little. Kieli remembered almost taking him for a seminarian from the capital when she'd first passed by him at the Easterbury train station two and a half years ago. He'd looked pretty rough back then, but right now he really did look the part.



“Ah—um—i-it suits you!” Kieli blurted, a strange attack of shyness making her tongue stumble as she waved her hands in front of her for emphasis. Her heart beat wildly, and her cheeks began to burn.

“Oh. Thanks,” Harvey mumbled vaguely, scratching his head almost as if he felt a little shy himself. They gazed at each other for a little while in skittish silence, Kieli looking up through her lashes at him, Harvey looking down through his lashes at her, and it felt like the mood was *starting* to get just the teeniest bit romantic—

Kshht, zikka, bzzzzzzzz! came the radio’s static, flagrantly interrupting.

Kieli groaned. “Corporaaaalllll...”

Harvey sighed and hung his head in defeat.

Gnn, bzzz...crrr...!

“Hey, I haven’t even done anything yet!”

Gnn-zik!

“What? No, the ‘yet’ thing was just a figure of speech—quit jumping on every little detail!”

The radio static and Harvey started bickering about something, but Kieli couldn’t understand what their conversation was about. She looked back and forth between Harvey’s face and the radio around her neck in confusion.

She was the only one left out of things again, it felt like. The odd one out. Depression settled over her once again. “Harvey, how come *you* can understand him...?” she murmured helplessly, and then immediately sank even further into self-loathing at the thought that she’d sounded jealous of him. Unable to endure it, she dropped her head and stared down at the tips of her shoes.

Harvey’s hand stretched toward Kieli and casually ruffled her hair. It felt as if he was trying to console her, which actually had the opposite effect, making her feel even more pathetic. She was starting to want to cry. “I can’t hear the Corporal’s voice...!”

“Sure you can, Kieli. You’re just not listening.”

“I...I am too listening.” But her voice petered doubtfully out almost before it escaped her mouth.

You’re just not listening... Was that true? Yes, she knew that right now she was confused with herself for feeling on the verge of accepting her father, and she was confused about accepting reality

in general, and she was building walls to keep out a lot of things she wanted to just reject. She did know that much. *Is that why I can't hear the Corporal's voice, either...? But—but then how can I be more open so that I can hear him?*

Things started getting noisy downstairs. She could hear men talking and the clanky sound of armored people walking around.

"The southern barricade's been breached! Requesting backup!" they heard a voice shout from downstairs, and the soldiers packed into the room on the floor above them took off running. The flood of people bolting down the steps almost knocked Kieli over. Flattening herself against the wall to keep out of their way, she scanned her surroundings uneasily.

Harvey's hand tugged at one of the hands she was using to cradle the radio to her chest. The carbonization gun at his shoulder clanged as it swayed with the motion.

"Right now let's just go find Bea."

Just as Kieli followed his lead and began running, too, she saw Julius up above her on the stairs; he'd sprung into action with the soldiers. Harvey turned around mid-run and called, "Julius, we're splitting up!"

"Uh, right. Be careful," Julius agreed. Teetering a little as Harvey pulled her along by the hand, Kieli turned back to look at Julius, too.

"We'll always be friends, Juli!" she said, waving *see you later* with her free hand. The sight of him waving back at her (with a smile that looked strangely pained for some reason) disappeared behind the corner of the wall, and Kieli faced front again as she jogged down the staircase.

"What was that, a parting shot?" Harvey asked, glancing back at her. When she blinked at him, he only raised one eyebrow a little before turning away again. "It's nothing. Let's go."

They came out of the tower housing the temporary headquarters and out into the colonnade. It was noisy out here, too, with soldiers bustling to and fro carrying weapons and torches and things; but after a while the crowd gradually began to thin out, the din receding into the distance. Kieli was only following along behind Harvey. She didn't really know whether or not he had an idea where Beatrix might be and was heading somewhere in particular, but she was pretty sure they were going in the opposite direction from when she'd run away, tugged along by Sigri. The

direction of the cathedral.

“Ah!” Kieli blurted suddenly, stopping on her own this time. Since they were holding hands, they ended up sort of yanking at each other until Harvey was pulled back, stumbling a little as he slowed his step and turned to look at her quizzically. “Wait a second. I dropped it...” Kieli pulled her hand out of Harvey’s and jogged a few meters back the way she’d come, crouched down, and picked up what was lying on the ground there.

“It broke...”

It was the good-luck charm she’d gotten from Beatrix and tied around her left wrist. It looked as though the cord braided from Beatrix’s hair had snapped and the bracelet had come undone. The stone had fallen out, too.

Why would it snap all of a sudden like that...?

A vague unease stirred inside her. Still, she forced it down, telling herself firmly that it must be a coincidence, and tucked the stone and band into her skirt pocket. She stood back up, sending the radio swinging, and ran quickly back to where Harvey was waiting. “Sorry, it’s nothing. Let’s go,” Kieli called to him. Then she cocked her head, puzzled.

Harvey hadn’t reacted to her voice. Maybe he hadn’t noticed she was back at all. He’d turned his head toward the end of the colonnade, and he seemed to be looking intently at something. Kieli stood on her tiptoes and peered over his shoulder, trying to see what he was looking at.

The colonnade was beginning to fall dark now that the sun had finished setting. It stretched out straight in front of her to the far end of her vision. She could make out only the dim shapes of the thick, evenly spaced columns. Nothing was moving.

“What’s wrong...?” she whispered, intimidated by the grim atmosphere around Harvey without completely knowing why.

“For a second I...thought I’d found Bea,” he answered in a low voice, still staring straight ahead. Harvey put his hand over his heart and gripped there lightly. He kept on mumbling, not really making any sense. “And I sense Bea’s presence, too...but...What is this...?” He seemed to be talking more to himself than Kieli, and not understanding any more of it than she was.

Shlipk, shlipk, shlipk...

Kieli began to hear a faint sound coming from farther down the colonnade. She went cold, grabbing Harvey's sleeve tightly. The sticky smacking sound of an animal chewing raw meat—

When she squinted as hard as she could into the dusky colonnade striped with shadows, she could make out bits of half-eaten monsters scattered here and there like a trail of bread crumbs. She gulped against the rising nausea and clutched Harvey's arm. Harvey kept pressing his hand to his chest and staring grimly ahead, stiff and still.

A horrible stench assailed her nostrils from somewhere at the far end of the trail of broken monster bodies. There in the shadow of one of the pillars crouched a fidgeting, writhing *thing*—a sort of mass of flesh. A misshapen blob of flesh and metal, dragging what looked like snapped pipes and cables from various parts of the giant lump of meat at least twice as tall as Kieli that made up its body. When she looked closely, she realized the lump of meat was made up of *failure* parts. Countless arms and legs stuck out at impossible angles, and countless slack faces had sunken into its surface.

What is that thing...?

The giant crouching monster was eating away at a failure corpse with single-minded dedication. As it devoured the rotten flesh, bits of the corpse surfaced on its body from within, erupting out of its skin and making it even bigger and more misshapen. When it crushed the failure's stone heart in its mouth—so buried in meat she could hardly think of it as a “mouth”—something exploded inside violently enough to blow off a good half of its face. But regeneration began immediately, cells stitching themselves back together as if they had a will of their own.

Its eyes were almost completely buried in meat, too, to the point where Kieli doubted they could actually see anything; still, the *thing* noticed them and swiveled those eyes in their direction. With the partly eaten leg of a failure still dangling from the corner of its mouth like a bizarre tentacle, it sluggishly turned to face them, and—

Owooonn...!

With a low bellow, the mass of flesh came barreling a little clumsily toward them.

“Out of the way!” Harvey gave Kieli a shove that sent her stumbling a few paces backward. A beat later the radio hit her in the belly. The thing made a beeline straight for Harvey; Harvey

sank down low and slipped beneath its arms.

Even as her back smacked into a pillar behind her, Kieli's eyes stayed wide open and riveted on the monster.

She'd spotted something almost impossible to believe: a familiar face, a face she knew very well, buried in one part of that monster's body.

There was a scratchy voice coming out of her mouth.

"It...can't be..."

Her knees crumpled underneath her, and she sank to the ground.

As soon as he'd shoved Kieli away, Harvey knew instinctively that she wasn't even on the enemy's radar.

It's only after me...?

The thing coming straight for him swiped at him with an arm made of the melded bits of other corpses. The arm's simple flail was easy enough to dodge, but the cable it dragged along with it cracked toward him like a whip. Harvey lifted the carbonization gun hanging from his shoulder and let its barrel take the brunt of the attack. The deep rut it left in the body of his gun sent a shiver down his spine. His eyes lit on a scrap of a failure corpse lying at his feet—an arm or something. When he picked it up and lobbed it straight for his opponent's face, the enemy temporarily transferred its attention to the dead arm whizzing in front of it, latching on to it and beginning to eat. Was it acting on a sort of autopilot, some primitive animal survival instinct driving it to take in the corpses to fuel its own growth? It must only target Undyings.

Harvey sensed the core inside himself thumping hard, experiencing some strange pressure. He felt something in the center of his enemy's body resonating with it. The thing was a mass of metal and flesh centered on an enormous core, wrapped in the carrion and cables and pipes it had absorbed.

Once it finished eating the arm, it shifted its focus back to Harvey. It charged blindly at him and swiped. He wouldn't let the same move hit him twice—at the same time as he slipped past its arm, he dove into close range, grabbed the base of the flexible cable that came flying at him, and yanked his enemy off balance.

Which was all well and good—

"Ah!"

—but since he'd never fought anyone this gigantic before, he totally misjudged the distance and didn't manage to get out of the way before the huge form fell on top of him.

Knocked over by the mass of flesh, Harvey hit the side of his head on the floor going down, and his vision darkened. His enemy's enormous hand jabbed his chest before he could move. A couple of his ribs creaked, and then there was a snapping noise. Harvey shoved at it with all his might, but he was overpowered. Five misshapen fingers were just beginning to dig into his chest when—*crackle!*—he felt a pressure like a burst of static electricity—no, like some sort of even stronger and heavier mutual repulsion—in his core. Harvey and the monster were both thrown back a little ways in opposite directions, and the eyes buried in that lump of meat met Harvey's at close range. Sandy eyes like the morning sky over the wilderness, just barely peeping out of the folds of flesh.

"...na...ngh...?" It gurgled thickly and appeared to tilt its head slightly.

And in that instant—

"—?"

Its eyes suddenly grew enormous in Harvey's vision, and a sand-colored light burst in his brain and filled it, as though he'd been sucked into the monster's irises.

An image flowed into his mind, a flat image of nothing but a solid sandy color.

He was in a sprawling space the color of sand. Behind him was a crude gray building, crumbling and half in ruins now. There was a half-collapsed wall of blocks enclosing the space. A chin-up bar crushed out of shape. A tiny smoldering sand pit.

This is...a school...Is it those kids' school in South Westerbury?

He saw two small forms in one corner of the schoolyard, in front of the chin-up bar. A young redheaded boy crouching, back hunched, single-mindedly building a pile out of rocks fully as big as his own fist. And another boy standing at a distance and watching him work. There were a bunch of tiny stone grave markers built up in front of that chin-up bar so pitifully crushed out of shape that children would probably never be able to play on it again.

What the hell is this? Why would it start showing me this all of a sudden—?

There was an army truck parked far away across the wall of blocks that surrounded the yard facing the school building. Its

ensign indicated that it was on their side: part of the South Westerbury army's Undying platoon. Two large soldiers in long, dark greatcoats stood next to it.

Guess some stray artillery fire landed on 'em... said one of the soldiers emotionlessly, and started climbing into the truck without showing any particular inclination to help them. The other soldier looked equally emotionless, his sandy eyes just watching from a distance while the boys piled up their rocks.

Why do you have this memory...? Who are you...?!

"Who are you?!" Harvey screamed, at the same time pulling the trigger of his carbonization gun. It was just a wild shot, though, and it missed all the vital organs. All it did was blow away a chunk of the thing's arm.

The images that had been ruling his consciousness broke off. But just before they did—

Let's go, Jude.

—Harvey heard the first soldier's voice call.

"What...?!"

He felt dizzy, as if he'd been punched in the head. His head spun with confusion. "No...no!" In a fit of some strong emotion, he jerked up the carbonization gun and trained it on a vital point this time: the center of the enemy's chest—

"Harvey, don't!" cut in a girl's voice in something like a scream. By that time, his left index finger was already pulling the trigger. Still, reflex came quicker than thought, and he managed to shift his aim just slightly before the bullet ripped free. Half the lump of meat's torso blew away.

And among the chunks of meat raining down on his head—

There was a fragment of a familiar face absorbed into its flesh.

A fragment of a familiar...woman's face.

"B...Bea...?" he whispered, aghast. He sat down right where he was, cradling the lump of flesh that contained her face, and let his eyes roam the air around him, searching for the girl who'd screamed as if he was looking for some sort of answer. There: Kieli stood clutching a pillar on one side of the colonnade and staring toward them. She was shaking violently, face white as a sheet. Her

reaction was his answer. His eyes hadn't been mistaken. *This* was unmistakably *her*.

He had to dodge the next attack. But his body didn't move as he stared up at the enemy. Light burst in his brain again.

A round room where tightly packed pipes and cables covered the walls and ceiling and floor.

The hideous corpse of his former superior, now nothing but a stone heart and bits of nervous system hooked up to bio-cables.

No...

Superimposed over sandy eyes buried in a misshapen rotting face made from fused corpses, Harvey saw eyes of the same color that belonged to a man he'd known long ago, his former superior. His confused mind, rejecting reality, repeated the same word over and over and over. *Nonononono—*

"Ungh...na."

With a monstrous groan he couldn't believe would ever come out of the mouth of an intelligent human—or at least, not his superior's mouth—the thing in front of him lashed out with one arm. Harvey didn't even move to defend himself. It clocked him in the head, and he and the carbonization gun both skidded along the floor. His mind swam.

"Ju...de..." Harvey ground the name out of his throat as he propped himself up on his right elbow and tried to sit. His opponent, who was moving to grab him, stopped short. For a few moments they gazed searchingly into each other's eyes.

"Ungh...ahh..."

Without warning, it clutched its head and moaned in pain, taking an unsteady step backward.

"Ngh, na, nghaah!"

It waved its arms around wildly, destroying a few nearby columns, as it backed away several more paces. Turning around with heavy steps that shook the ground beneath them, it began to move ponderously away.

"Wait..." Harvey tried to get up and follow, but a stabbing pain behind his left eye sent his vision askew and he fell over again. He heard Kieli's voice calling him from somewhere at the edge of his hearing. She sounded muffled. He just barely managed to look up at the retreating figure making its way out of his seriously warped and tilted field of vision.

The retreating back of a mass of carrion and scrap metal. The

retreating back of his former superior officer. That sturdy, masculine back in army uniform overlapped with this one in his mind's eye.

"No...It's not true!" Harvey screamed with all the air in his lungs as he doubled over and slammed his fist into the ground.



"Father," a child's innocent voice called to him, and Yoshiu looked down from where he'd been clinging to the barricade. A young girl who came up to somewhere around his waist stood at his feet. She was pressing both hands to her torso and squirming.

"I gotta pee."

"What?" Yoshiu leaned away from her for a second, taken aback, before crouching down so that they were the same height and meeting her eyes. "Uh-oh. Do you think you can hold it for a little longer?"

"Uh-huh. If it's only for a little bit, I'll try my best."

"All right. Good girl."

She nodded, clenching both fists to fire herself up. When he patted her on the head, she seemed happy about the praise, and grinned proudly.

"I'm sorry, Father," a woman said, running up to them and putting her arm around the girl's shoulders. This must be her mother. "Honey, you shouldn't get in his way. It's dangerous here, so let's go back to the other side of the room, okay?" She took her daughter's hand. Their group of more than twenty people was still holed up in the supply room. The women, children, and elderly were huddled together nervously in the back of the cramped space, watching the men stand at the doorway bracing the barricade of pews.

"Will the angel come back again, Father?" the girl said, suddenly turning back to look at him as her mother pulled her back to the rear.

Yoshiu blinked. Her mother was the one who flushed red and hissed, "Stop it! That was *not* an angel!"

"It wasn't?" the girl questioned innocently, looking up at her mother with big, rounded eyes. "But she was really pretty, and she saved us, too!"

“How could you say that in front of a priest?!” her mother interrupted her in a hiss. She met her daughter’s eyes, crouching down, and shook her as she said, “That was a Demon of War! We’ve talked about them before, remember? They’re horrible, scary monsters. Bad children who say things like that get their hearts gouged out by Church Soldiers!”

“Ma’am,” Yoshiu broke in reprovably. When the woman looked up at him, ashamed, he favored her with the soft smile that he’d deliberately perfected during those sermons in the country-town worship services so that even if he was third-rate, he’d at least *look* the part of a priest. “Please don’t worry. A Church Soldier would never gouge out a child’s heart.” It was just one of those stock threats used to frighten children, of course, and there wasn’t an adult in the world who seriously believed it, but Yoshiu counseled her in a perfectly serious voice that left her looking baffled.

He drew the girl away from her mother’s frozen hands, leaned in close, and whispered impishly in her ear, “Did she look like an angel to you?”

“Yeah! I even saw sparkly angel wings!”

“I see; you even saw her wings.”

“Mama says she didn’t see them, but *I* did. An angel protected us! Right, Father?” the girl chattered happily with sparkling eyes. She looked puzzled toward the end, though. Yoshiu had tilted his head down and put a hand over his eyes. She peered curiously at his face and said, “What’s wrong, Father? Are you crying? Do you hurt somewhere?”

“No, it’s nothing.” Yoshiu shook his head slightly without looking up. He wrapped his arms around the young girl’s small body in a hug and whispered “Thank you...” into her ear with all his heart. To this girl in front of him, and to those country kids who’d brought the angel to him that day, too.

Surely a child’s eyes, looking without resistance or prejudice, really could see her angel’s wings. Yoshiu believed that. He wanted to believe it.

“It’s okay. The angel will come back.”

“Really? We’ll get to see the pretty angel again?”

“Yeah, I’m sure we will,” Yoshiu answered, half-assuring her and half-telling it to himself. Something warm was spreading over him, outward from his torso where his body touched hers. *I want to see her again. Please let me see her again...* he prayed. Not to the

Church's God, but to Something, something that might perform a miracle for them.

"Father..." the girl said in his ear, in a suddenly reluctant and quiet voice.

"Hmm?" When he raised his face from her shoulder and pulled away, she squirmed, looking embarrassed. "I'm sorry...I couldn't hold it after all."

"Oh dear..."

Warm stains that smelled of ammonia were spreading on the crotch of her pants and the front of his robes. "I-I'm so sorry, Father!" the girl's mother cried, red-faced. She hurriedly pulled her daughter away. The girl clung to her and began to snifle. Looking at her, Yoshiu mustered up a stiff, awkward smile.

"I-it's okay. It's not your fault if you couldn't hold it..."

He sighed and turned back to the barricade as he stripped off his outer robes. The gaping hole in the barricade from when she'd come charging in had already been reinforced with other pews, which the men were holding in place as they peeked outside through the cracks.

Please come back, he prayed silently. He wanted to tell her, to make sure she knew. *It's not only me and that girl—there are all kinds of other people who are grateful to you, too. I'm sure of it.* And more than anything, *he* wanted to see her again. She was a first-class angel and he was just some low-level priest who couldn't get ahead in the world—a horrible match for her. But still.

I want to see you again.



Let's celebrate your next birthday, no matter what! On the day in the middle of summer. It's a promise, okay?

Okay, okay.

You promise. No matter what.

No matter what.

No matter what...

She hiccupped. "Beatrix..."

Kieli squeezed Beatrix's broken good-luck charm tight in her hands and pressed them to her forehead, calling her name over and over as she sobbed. It felt as if she'd been crying like this for hours now, and she was completely exhausted from crying, and she'd cried so much already that she half-thought all the moisture in her body must have been used up fueling the tears, but no matter how many she wrung out of herself, they just kept coming.

The memories paraded through her mind: all the words they'd exchanged, her always crisp and resonant voice so full of confidence, the way she was far too decisive when she shopped, the face she made when she was feeling sulky, her sharp gaze staring straight-on at an enemy, and her beautiful smile.

She'd promised they'd celebrate her next birthday. She'd *promised*, "no matter what." *This can't be real. It has to be a nightmare.*

Your happiness is always top priority—

Kieli had wanted the woman who told her that to be happy, too. It was only right that she be happier. How beautiful, how amazing would her smile be when she was happy? It was sure to shine even brighter than any smile she'd ever given Kieli before.

While Kieli sobbed as she thought about all the memories of Beatrix welling up one after another in her mind, Harvey squatted with his back to her, cutting Beatrix's body away from the fusion of failure parts that made up the mass of flesh on the ground. In contrast to Kieli, who went on crying long after her face was an undignified soggy mess, he'd been silent for a long time now. Just working, without saying a word. He scraped away bits of the mushy, foul-smelling lump of meat with his hand as unflinchingly as if it were ordinary sand or dirt, patiently dragging her body out.



He'd been able to extricate only her head and her upper body, with one arm still attached; the rest of her had already merged too completely into the mass of flesh to salvage. He hadn't been able to find the core that should have been buried in her chest anywhere inside it. Maybe it had been absorbed into that giant monster's body.

That monster...*Jude*. She'd heard Harvey call it that. Was that thing really the Jude who'd been locked up in that lab...?

Harvey's hand carefully wiped off the coal-tar-like fluid stuck to her face and hair. He closed her empty blue eyes with his palm, and then he took off his own coat by tugging on the left sleeve with his mouth and spread it gently over her body. He'd carried out all these tasks carefully yet detachedly, with such sure and mechanical movements he might as well be running on autopilot. He didn't show his feelings on the surface like the wailing Kieli did. In fact, it looked as if all emotion had completely left him.

Kieli couldn't help Harvey, or even say anything to him. His silent back seemed to be warning her off, saying, *This is my job*. Saying he'd known her ten times longer than *Kieli* had, and it was *his* job to mourn her.

When she looked at his back, in her mind's eye it overlapped with the back of the redheaded boy in that schoolyard trapped in the magnetic field in Westerbury, building stone grave markers for the younger kids. Decades later, that little boy had become an adult, and here he was silently, dispassionately mourning an old friend just like he had that day. He'd gotten a lot taller since then, but right now he looked every bit as small and fragile to her as he had in childhood.

"Once..." Harvey murmured abruptly, still facing forward. Wiping at the tears that still wouldn't stop, Kieli raised her face. The crouched form in front of her continued without turning around. "...Jude told me something. He said he had the same name as a man from the Church's holy book, the one who betrayed the Messiah..." Why was he suddenly bringing that up?

Without lifting his eyes from Beatrix's body, Harvey continued in a dry, emotionless voice so soft he might have been talking to himself. "He said he had sins he had to atone for, too. But...those sins were too big, way too big for him to ever atone for, even if he

spent his whole eternal Undying life trying, he said. And at the time I just thought, ‘What’s the old fogey going on about now?’”

There was a pause. And then he spat gruffly, “But huh, I guess I get it now.”

With no warning, Harvey laughed. It was only a short little laugh, but it sent a chill up Kieli’s spine. It was dry and cold as the winter wind in the wilderness. A strange, somehow un-Harvey-like laugh, as if it belonged to someone else, as if he’d been taken over by some other creature.

“Harvey...?”

“Ah, it’s nothing. It’s nothing,” Harvey said in an incongruously light tone, gently stroking Beatrix’s short hair and still not turning around. The hair that was still the same beautiful golden even now that its owner had lost all her life-force.

“He—Jude—committed another sin today, against me, that’s too big for him to ever atone for. That’s why I need to kill him...” His murmur sank, low and sinister, into the gloom around them, and it unsettled Kieli deeply. She’d never heard him sound like this before. Harvey almost never bore ill will toward anyone; she’d never heard his voice sound threatening like this.

“Har...vey...?” Daunted by the sight of that back shaking with quiet rage, Kieli hugged the radio fast and unconsciously took a few steps back. This wasn’t the Harvey she knew.

Harvey stood up from where he’d crouched in front of Beatrix’s corpse and turned around. Thick, fat drops of blood dribbled down into the large pool at his feet—from the wound in the center of his chest that Jude had given him. “Harvey, stop...” Kieli began, but then her voice petered out. She was afraid of him. *Something’s wrong with him right now. Something’s definitely wrong.*

Without warning, Harvey jabbed his arm straight to the left. Startled by the sudden movement, Kieli missed her footing on her next step backward and landed smack on her butt on the floor.

So there was still a survivor in this area, then. A half-eaten *failure* had been in the act of leaping at Harvey from the shadow of a pillar. Harvey’s left hand had plunged unerringly through its chest to its heart.

“Ungh...ngha...”

The failure groaned in pain and flailed its limbs now that Harvey had stopped its advance. There was a bizarre creaking coming from inside its body. Harvey’s left arm worked so hard that

ropy blood vessels stood out against the surface of his skin; the same thing happened to his left cheek where the sore was. The failure turned pleading eyes on Harvey. Ignoring it, Harvey ripped the stone heart he held out of its body right along with the bio-cables attached to it.

The failure's body slumped down the pillar to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

"Ah—" Kieli sank weakly to the floor, cradling the radio. She stared fixedly at Harvey's profile as tiny tremors overtook her body. His dark brown eye looked emotionlessly down at the failure's body. And all the while the red-black blood dribbled from his chest, into a puddle on the floor.

"Har...vey...?" she called to him in a scratchy voice, and Harvey properly looked at her for the first time. A tiny spark of something like emotion finally lit in his deadened eyes. He abruptly covered his mouth with his palm, letting the stone heart slip artlessly from his hand.

"Ugh..."

Then he doubled painfully over and vomited a stream of blood and gastric juice.

Kieli scrambled hurriedly to his side, half-crawling. "Harvey," she called, and put her arms around him from behind, but even as he coughed and retched, he pushed her away and tried to stand up again with a pillar for support.

"Jude..."

It sounded as though he was forcing the whisper out of his throat.

"I...I have to settle this. I have to settle it for you. I have to do this last thing for you..."

Kieli felt something different in him now: not the malice from before, but something more like a grim resolve that ripped her heart out. She clung to his back. She couldn't tell him "Stop," but she couldn't help him, either; she had no idea what to do, so she just hugged tight, half-crying. Harvey collapsed back down to his knees, covering his face with the hand slick with his own blood as though trying to keep the feelings in. He grabbed a fistful of his bangs and tugged.

"How long does he intend to keep sinning in that—that messed-up body...?" A breath. "Let's end this, Jude...Jude..."

The agonized mutter that escaped from between the fingers

over his face stabbed Kieli through the chest. For a moment she thought *her* breath would stop.

Harvey hadn't been angry. He'd been sad. He'd been stifling his feelings, but in his heart he'd been crying all along. For Beatrix; for Jude, who'd turned into that misshapen blob and still kept moving; and for the failures who'd died and lost their minds and still weren't allowed to truly die. In his heart he'd been sobbing; hurting for them hard enough to vomit blood. He really was only ever thinking about other people.

Harvey forced himself back to his feet again and started walking, scraping his shoulder against the pillar. Kieli just sat there and looked up at his back. She couldn't tell him to stop.

A few short steps.

That was all he managed before he tripped over the body of a failure on the floor and fell flat on his face.

He stayed there lying in an unnatural heap and didn't move again.

".....?"

Kieli stood up unsteadily and went over to him. Since she'd been looking only at Harvey, she tripped over the same corpse he had and fell down more or less on top of him. Harvey's copper and dark brown eyes stared into space, and he stayed there lying unnaturally limp like a broken doll on a trash heap and didn't move. "Harvey...? What's wrong?" She shook him and called to him with no effect. His empty gaze just roamed the air in front of him, never focusing on anything.

Kieli put her ear against his chest and tried listening for his heartbeat. It was faint, but she could still make out the *ba-dum, ba-dum* of the stone heart. She experimentally slapped his cheek. She called his name over and over.

In the beginning she did her best to assess his condition rationally, but as the minutes passed she started to panic. "Harvey...Harvey!"

Growing desperate, she shook him hard. His head only bobbed back and forth like a doll's. No response.

"Corporal...!"

She looked down at the radio for help. "Harvey won't move! What's wrong? Tell me, what's wrong with him?" The radio's speaker poured out noise, as if it was trying to tell her something, but Kieli just shook her head in confusion. "I don't know. I don't

know what you're saying; I can't understand you. I can't understand without Harvey...! Listen, Harvey won't move. First Beatrix—First Beatrix won't move, and now Harvey! Corporal, say something, tell me...!" She didn't know and couldn't think about what was happening, what to do. She just wrapped her arms around Harvey's unmoving chest.

"Harvey, no, I don't want this!"

She called for him until her voice went hoarse. She sobbed on and on until her throat hurt. But the left hand that could clumsily, kindly draw her head to his chest still just lolled there where it had landed on the floor, and didn't move.

It was quiet. Kind of like she was all alone in this place.

Kieli slumped on Harvey's chest just as though she were a tossed-away doll, too. She'd cried so long and hard over Beatrix that the tears had run dry; now it was almost as though she had used up all her feelings, even—everything in her heart had dried up, and she couldn't summon the strength to move. The radio's noise seemed awfully far away, and it never gave her any words. Almost as if the moment Harvey stopped moving, the radio had turned into just some radio, too.

Harvey was the thread that connected me to everything else in this world, everything in the last two and a half years of our adventure and all the strange things we went through, Kieli thought. Now it was as if the moment that thread snapped, the whole two and a half years had popped like a bubble, suddenly turned meaningless. It was as if the radio had never spoken in the first place.

It was quiet. Kind of like she was all alone in this world.

All that crying had worn her out. She started to feel herself dozing, and maybe she even slept a little, but when her eyes snapped open she was still all alone, and nothing had changed. *How long have I been here like this?* It felt as if a long time had passed. Days and days, maybe. *If people can cry themselves to sleep*, she wondered, *how come they can't cry themselves to death?* She found herself thinking that since she couldn't do that, she might as well just stay here until she starved to death.

Tee hee hee... she heard a voice say. A whisperingly soft girl's laugh. Kieli recognized that laugh. She lifted her gaze from where it had been wandering vacantly along the floor and looked sluggishly

around.

“Who’s there?” she called, pleading. Her throat was bone-dry from all the wailing and crying, and her scratchy voice stuck coming out. Anybody would have done. Anybody would have done, as long as they got her out of this horrible aloneness.

A girl in a white slip was standing there in midair. She’d recognized the voice, and now she saw the proof: It was that girl who’d come out of the painting in her room.

“Are you crying?” the girl ask innocently in her cheerful voice. When Kieli nodded from where she lay limp from the exhaustion of crying, the girl smiled and offered her a pale, delicate hand.

“Come here. I’ll show you something neat.”

Kieli weakly took her hand. The moment the girl gave it a tug, her leaden body was abruptly freed from gravity and lightened until she floated in the air.

“Ah...!”

The girl holding her hand grinned at Kieli’s surprise. When Kieli looked down, she saw her own heavy body below her floating feet. Face sticky with dried tear trails, it was nestled up to Harvey’s fallen body, sleeping like the dead.

“I’m...” She opened and closed her hands a few times, testing her sensations, and then surveyed her body. She could see the hazy outlines of the rest of the colonnade through it. Beatrix’s corpse, covered by Harvey’s coat, looked exactly like it had before, as did the collapsed forms of Harvey and herself. To all appearances, her spirit had risen up out of a world frozen in time. But if nothing else, the feel of the girl’s hand holding hers was clear and real.

Following her lead, Kieli floated down to their fallen bodies and sat on her knees next to Harvey. He was still staring up into the empty air with unfocused eyes, just like before, collapsed on the floor like a doll. The weight she no longer had was transformed into feeling, sitting heavily on her heart. Kieli thought she might cry again. The girl gave her a faint smile and tugged on her hand. Kieli let her softly touch their hands to Harvey’s body.

Her hand passed right through the surface.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum...

The sound of his slowly but surely beating heart flowed into her consciousness. The sound of his blood with its healing powers circulating through his arteries and veins. It was faltering and unsteady, yes, but that blood was reflecting its owner's will even so, working its hardest to repair his tattered body.

"Do you see? He's a wreck," the girl's innocent voice told her.

He really was a wreck, even more so than he looked. Even his insides were wrecked. His cracked stone heart pulsated with faint amber light; a little arrhythmically, yes, but still managing not to stop circulating blood, trying to knit together the battered vessels and skin and muscle and nerves.

Biting her lip, Kieli brought her face up close to his cheek. The optical nerve to the left eye he'd gotten from Mane, the one that she was sure must've been able to see at least for a while, was wrecked already, too, and it was already putting pressure on the cranial nerves. She could sense it sort of clouded over with a hazy gray.

"He's gotten—he's gotten so..."

"But you know," the girl's voice said, "he's still alive."

Kieli wordlessly shook her head. It made her want to say *It's enough. It's enough. Stop. You don't have to keep trying so hard even after you've let yourself get this wrecked...*

"Kieli," she heard a different voice say. A low, staticky, male voice. The familiar, long-missed voice of the radio reached her in clear words now, not coming through her ears but directly into her brain. Kieli drew in close to her own collapsed body and put her face next to the radio.

"Corporal!" She choked a little. "What should I do? I don't know; please tell me..." she appealed, shaking her head. Her heart soaked up the radio's strong voice.

"Give him a hand. He hasn't given up yet. He's trying to live. You can hear him, can't you?"

At this, Kieli strained her ears. Yes; she could make out that irregular heartbeat, that faint sound of the breaking-down stone heart pulsating with its amber light.

"I can't do it..."

The thing was, all she desperately wanted to say right now was *Stop working so hard.*

"Kieli, don't you say that to him," the radio's voice admonished patiently. *"You're the only one who can do this. Find him and bring him back. Please."*

“But...what should I do?”

The girl next to Kieli tugged on her hand. Grinning, she pressed it to the center of Harvey’s body.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum...

The heartbeat expanded in her ears until it permeated her entire consciousness and took over everything. Her field of vision bled away, bled white as if sucked into that faintly pulsing amber light.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum...

The sound of the heartbeat dimly permeated the air.

“Where am I...?”

When her whited-out vision recovered, Kieli was standing all by herself in a place she’d never seen before. The ghost girl and the radio were both gone. The bodies of Harvey and herself that had been lying at her feet were gone, too. She wasn’t in a colonnade of the cathedral; she was looking at a dizzying panorama of dried-out wilderness that stretched out as far as the eye could see in every direction. Kieli stood there all alone in the middle of the wilderness, worry twisting her face.

The rocky ground was shaking slightly. With no warning, the earth right in front of her toes crumbled with a deafening roar, and she hastily yanked her foot back and moved away. Now that the ground before her was gone, suddenly Kieli found herself standing on a cliff, watching fragments of rock plummet to the valley below.

A chill went up her spine, and she looked around her to see the land shaking violently all the way to the horizon. Here and there across the wilderness, landslides were happening or new cracks were opening up in the ground. Even the hazy sand-colored sky above her rumbled as though it might break apart and come crashing down any second. Kieli planted her feet firmly on the unstable ground with everything she had.

“What is this place...?”

It was a world that looked as if it might break down any second. Another crack opened up in the ground nearby, and little fragments of rock kept on raining down on her from overhead, too. The whole world was enveloped in one big rumble that rattled her eardrums. Covering both ears with her hands, Kieli stooped forward and shielded her head as best she could as she scanned her

surroundings. “Is anyone there?!” she shouted. At least, she thought she’d shouted, but her own voice was swallowed up by the rumble of the world so that she could barely hear it.

Where am I?

It was as if she was witnessing the collapse of the planet.

For lack of any better ideas, she started walking, covering her ears and tottering as she made her way around the fissures. A crack opened up in the ground at her feet and robbed her of her footing. She fell down hard.

What’s going on here? Where the heck did I get thrown to? Had she wandered into a time loop of the past made by ghosts, like before? Or...was this actually some world way, way in the future? The era when the planet would end?

“Hello?! Anyone?! Corporal!” She called for help on all fours on the shaking ground. But her voice only vanished away, swallowed up by the rumbling. So Kieli just kept going as best she could, wriggling along on her stomach now. One of her feet skidded, and for a moment she almost went over the edge. She screamed and clutched the rock surface with both hands. Her legs swung back and forth over the sheer cliff that dropped endlessly down. The hem of her skirt fluttered in the wind.

She used every ounce of strength in her body to claw her way back up onto the cliff, scraping both knees in the process. Just as she was heaving a sigh of relief, she caught sight of someone up ahead of her in the wilderness.

A person...!

The very first thing to catch her eye was the rusty copper hair fluttering in the dry wind. “Harvey!” she cried in a voice tearful with relief. But—

It’s not...? That wasn’t Harvey. It was someone much smaller: a boy in simple clothes that looked like off-white pajamas.

Kieli went still where she clung to the ground on all fours and stared, wide-eyed. The boy picked up a big hunk of rock that looked easily heavier than he was and tottered over to the crevice with it, where he tossed the rock in as though he was trying to patch up the broken ground. Then he walked back on slightly unsteady feet, picked up another equally large rock, brought it over, and stuck it in the crevice too. He silently repeated this task over and over like an automaton, or a prisoner forced into hard labor. He wore no shoes; both bare feet were as horribly scraped as in the pictures of

criminals carrying their crosses. The simple white pajamas looked like a prison uniform more than anything else to her now.

Cracks opened up in the rock he carried. A chunk of it broke off and fell, pinning his slender arm to the ground.

“Ah!” Kieli stood up, teetering on the shaking ground, and ran over to him. “Are you okay?” she called, trying to help him, but he showed no sign of a response, as though he didn’t see Kieli there at all. He just shoved the rock away with his own ruined right hand and then moved to pick it up. Never mind Kieli; he didn’t even seem to pay any attention to his own body as he went about his work of filling the cracks in the ground. Shards of rock rained down his back, hurting him and leaving streaks of dirt and blood on his white pajamas.

This boy is...Harvey.

Not knowing what else she could say to him, Kieli only stood and watched him just carrying out the same task over and over with single-minded purpose like some sort of forced laborer.

The longer she watched, the more she was sure of it. This boy’s back was much smaller than the one she’d seen mourning over Beatrix’s body; as small and thin as the back of that boy in the ruined schoolyard building stone grave markers, and though it was getting so cut and bruised now that it hurt Kieli just to look at it, he kept on silently repairing the cracks in this falling-apart world.

Where am I?

The boy tripped and fell as he carried over his next rock. Kieli ran to him once again and tried to help him up. But he was still as indifferent to her presence as ever, getting unsteadily up on his own and moving to pick up the rock again. His face was sickly pale. His coppery eyes just stared vaguely forward, never turning to face Kieli.

“Stop it; this is dangerous! You’ll die! Stop it!” Kieli circled in front of him, trying to stop him, but her voice still didn’t reach him. Those young hands carrying rock after rock...It wasn’t only his crushed right hand; his left hand was a wreck too, missing patches of skin. “No, stop it!”

The boy carried his latest rock right past her. She hugged him from behind with all her might to stop him. He stumbled, and the rock slipped out of his arms. Kieli wrapped both his battered hands in her own, cradling them in front of his chest in a prayerful position.

“Come on, can’t you hear me? Don’t you recognize me?” Kieli asked tearfully, gazing at the boy’s face, but his eyes just vacantly roamed the empty air in front of her, as if perhaps he didn’t understand her language. As she sank to the ground, stunned, he shook off her hands and used his own tattered, nearly broken ones to pick up yet another fallen rock.

Then the ground split beneath his feet, and the boy in white pajamas disappeared from sight along with the rock he held. Kieli immediately leaned down over the edge and seized his hand. The rock tumbled noisily down, and the boy’s small body swayed left and right in the wind at the edge of the cliff. Fragments of rock rolled down around them and were swallowed up by the ravine.



“Hold on tight!” Kieli shouted as she desperately channeled all her strength into supporting the boy’s weight, but he just dangled there passively. He didn’t grip her hand back. His wrist slipped in her hold with a jerk, and she was sure he’d slip from her grasp any second. “Please! Please...*Harvey!*”

At that shout, the boy’s dazed eyes flitted up to look at her for the first time.

Did he recognize his name? Kieli hoped breathlessly.

Just then—

A crack opened up in the edge of the rock ledge where Kieli was hanging on, and the whole thing split apart with a crash.

They became just like the falling rocks around them, plummeting together down into the ravine between the two steep cliffs.

“Harvey...!”

In response to his name, she felt the boy finally return her grip at the very last moment.

And so, holding hands, they fell into the abyss—

Episode 2: His Neverland

Holding hands, they fell into the abyss—

Huh...?

Surfacing from sleep, Kieli blinked groggily several times at the sight before her.

It wasn't the darkness of a rugged valley floor that she'd expected. She was lying in a simple but clean and comfortable bed.

Did someone save us...? With her cheek still resting on the pillow and her mind still foggy, Kieli scanned her surroundings. They consisted of a room with such a bare-bones layout she could probably call the place a "shack." The construction of the bed was equally bare-bones in its simplicity, but maybe it belonged to a big person, because it was also very big.

It was when she peeled away the blanket covering her and slowly tried to sit up that Kieli realized.

Beneath the blanket was a redheaded young boy, sleeping snuggled up against her torso. Her right hand and the boy's left still gripped each other tightly. Although his body was as covered in cuts and bruises as ever, most of them had been bandaged; he was tucked between Kieli's body and the clean white sheets and sleeping quietly. It looked like it was a nice rest, too. Kieli sat up in bed without letting go of the boy's hand and gazed down at his sleeping face for a while.

When she stroked lightly at his disheveled copper hair, he opened his eyes. Two eyes the same copper as his hair roamed the empty air in front of him.

"Are you okay?" Kieli asked. At the sound of her voice, the boy shifted his gaze toward her and tilted his head a little. Maybe he really couldn't understand her words. His sluggish, clumsy movements and spaced-out expression made him seem a bit slow. What was different from before, though, was that he seemed to be

properly aware and attentive of Kieli now.

There was an unadorned square window next to the bed. The world on the other side of the window was still falling to pieces; she saw rock slides happening here and there in the vast wilderness outside. Even inside the shack Kieli could hear a muffled rumbling, but right now there was a sense of security, as if she was wrapped up safe inside its walls. Who could it belong to?

The door of the room opened with a creak.

When she and the boy looked that way, a man appeared. He had such a big, sturdy build that she thought he'd probably hit his head if he didn't duck coming through the doorway. Somewhat frightened, Kieli wrapped her arms protectively around the boy.

"So you're awake," the man said in exactly the low and deep voice she'd imagined from the way he looked, though his tone was mild. His short, stiff hair and the bristly stubble on his chin, both of which were the sandy color of the morning sky over the wilderness, matched exactly with the image Kieli'd always had of teddy bears. The boy slipped out of Kieli's arms and slid out of bed to hop barefooted over to him without any sign of shyness. The man hugged him around the shoulders with a hand big enough to wrap clear all the way across his slim body and then turned his gaze to Kieli, too.

"I bet you're hungry."

Some warm, good smell was wafting in from the room on the other side of the door. Kieli's stomach abruptly started complaining at her about the hunger she hadn't registered until now. She nodded emphatically. A faint smile appeared on his rugged face. "Come this way." Herding the boy in front of him, he disappeared into the other room. Kieli slid out of the bed and put on her boots, which had been placed right next to it, before following them out of the room.

The door led to a modest kitchen almost completely taken up by a simple table and chair set. Gentle steam rose from the pot in the center of the table. It carried the delicious smells of milk and butter. Kieli giggled a little at the sight of the boy already sitting in his chair and swinging his short legs back and forth.

When she sat next to him at the dinner table, the man ladled stew into tin dishes and set one in front of each of them. It was ridiculous that they were sitting there enjoying a leisurely dinner right in the middle of the ruin of the world, but at the same time it

gave her a strange feeling of relief.

Kieli scooped up a bite of stew with her spoon and put it in her mouth, and then her eyes widened at the old familiar taste spreading on her tongue.

It tasted just like the milk stew of poultry, eggs, and chickpeas that'd been the standard dish at Buzz & Suzie's Café in South-hairo...! With her spoon still sticking out of her mouth, Kieli stared at the man sitting across the table from her. He was crammed into an awfully small chair for a man of his size, head bent over a shoe he was silently cobbling. *Maybe that's his job?* He wasn't a sociable man and he didn't talk much, but he had a placid atmosphere about him. In that he was a large man of few words, he did kind of remind her of Buzz, the chef who made that stew; but he was definitely a different person. All the same, the air about him gave her a vague sense of déjà vu. *Who is this man...?*

She glanced at the boy next to her at the dinner table, who was applying himself to the task of eating his stew, gripping his spoon awkwardly and bringing his face to his bowl to sip at it instead. She remembered that he hadn't liked milk at this age. Sure enough, after a sip of the milk stew he grimaced a little sadly. But then he stole a quick upward glance at the man across from them and tackled his stew again with a serious look on his face. She'd thought something was strange; now she realized he was holding his spoon in the wrong hand.

This place is...

Kieli put down her spoon and looked around the room. A simple, ascetic shack with only the bare minimum of things needed for survival. Almost like the solitary cell of a prisoner in exile. The ruin of the world went on outside the kitchen's single window. In the small yard that she could see through it stood a bunch of grave markers made of carved white stone. Each one was inscribed with a tribute to the deceased in neat lettering, perhaps carved by this man. As though they were his atonement of sorts.

It all brought back the memory of an old locomotive engineer, all alone on an abandoned train platform with his back facing her, planting stick after stick in the ground. What she felt from these grave markers, though, wasn't the same anger at the world that the engineer had. It was a painful, even distressing mix of regret and sadness.

"Um, where are we right now...?" she asked the man a little

hesitantly.

The man answered briefly, his hands not pausing in their work. "His world."

"... 'His world'?"

Kieli remembered how just before white light had filled her vision, the ghost girl had guided her hand to touch the inside of Harvey's body. *This is Harvey's world...?* Was she peeking into the world inside Harvey?

Come to think of it, she did feel as though she'd seen fragments of Harvey's memories showing up in this world. The endless dry wilderness, the tiny scraps of memory from his boyhood days as Ephraim, the taste of the stew in South-hairo. And this sandy-haired cobbler sitting in front of her—this large man with the calm and stoic air about him that the boy was so fearlessly friendly with must be...

...Jude...?

And this boy is... She looked at the profile of the boy locked in desperate battle with his milk stew, his forehead practically touching the table. The boy who'd been trying to patch up this world, not even caring if he got hurt in the process. Who didn't talk.

This boy is Harvey himself.

A crevice opened up in the ground right outside the window of the shack. One corner of the garden graveyard collapsed, and white gravestones were swallowed up by the chasm. The boy lifted his face from his stew. Hopping down from his chair, he ran over to the window and plastered his face to the glass. His coppery eyes looked steadily out at the world. This small boy was trying to save the world, the body, the mind called "Harvey" from collapse, even though he got hurt in the process.

"This shack probably won't last much longer," the man said quietly. "You hurry on ahead."

"Ahead...?" Kieli asked, turning her worried face to him. "What should we do, sir? How do we stop this world"—*stop Harvey*—"from breaking?"

"Go to the end of the world."

"The end of the world?"

The man stopped working and raised his head, pointing straight out the window over the shoulder of the boy still gazing outside.

"If you head straight east, you'll come to a station. Board the train there."

Kieli nodded meekly at his explanation. The boy came back from the window and grabbed Kieli's sleeve with his delicate, scarred hand. He looked at her expressionlessly. Still, she could see that he was trying to tell her something.

"Yeah, let's go. I'll go with you. Let's go together." Smiling, Kieli nodded firmly to him.

"Take these with you."

The man rummaged around in the kitchen cupboard for a minute before finding a bit of paper and handing it to Kieli. It was a little packet with what looked like two tickets in it. They were blunt tickets, with nothing printed on them but an arrow pointing to the words "The End of the World" in faded ink. The arrow went only one way.

"Once you leave the shack, you won't be able to come back here. You go straight east and never look back. You mustn't look back no matter what; you got that?"

"We won't ever be able to come back...?"

"That's right. You mustn't come back. I can't go with you, so..." The man bent his knees and sank down in front of the boy. "Take these." One by one, he took the boy's bare feet by the ankle and slipped on the shoes he'd been cobbling. The boy lifted his legs without protest, teetering a little, and let him. The shoes had been tailored to fit perfectly over those feet as scraped up as his hands. The man looked up from his position on the floor and placed his big hands on the boy's shoulders.

"Ephraim."

The boy reacted faintly to the name, turning his empty gaze to the man. Pressing his forehead to the boy's shoulder, the man said in a strained voice, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me...No, I don't have the right to ask for that..."

Kieli couldn't bring herself to interrupt the heartbreakingly sad words of apology. She just watched the two of them, gripping the tickets tightly. She couldn't tell whether the boy heard any of it or not; he stayed silent, his empty eyes gazing vaguely at the man's hanging head. Paying no heed, the man kept on apologizing. His broad shoulders trembled as he spoke.

The sight overlapped in the back of Kieli's mind with that of her father, Sigri. He regretted having done something that couldn't ever be taken back, and even though he knew there was no way he'd ever be forgiven for it, even though he knew he'd never be able to

atone for it no matter what he did, no matter how cruelly he was rejected, all he could do was apologize. The sight of this man apologizing to this boy was a heavy blow to the chest. Kieli had rejected her father, swearing she'd never forgive him for abandoning her and her mother. Even though she knew he'd probably regretted it and punished himself for it all these long months and years, Kieli still couldn't accept him.

This boy, on the other hand...

As the man went on saying he was sorry, the boy tugged on his sleeve.

The man lifted his face from the boy's shoulder. The boy looked at him with his head tilted to one side, as if he didn't understand what the apologies were for. Then he took the man's face in his small hands, drew it close, and conked his own forehead lightly against the man's.

That was his only expression of emotion.

It was more than enough to send tears running down the man's cheeks, though.

Still holding the boy in his arms, he tilted his head down and whispered a trembling "Thank you."

They left the shack with the man to see them off. Kieli linked her fingers firmly with the boy's again and stared east, where she'd been told the station was. All she could see in front of her was an ever-so-gently sloping red-brown wilderness that stretched all the way to the horizon. The rumble of the world's ruin was still endlessly shaking the earth and skies. She wondered uneasily whether there really was such a thing as a station in this world, but she felt in her pocket for the one-way tickets to dispel her worry with the feel of them.

Once they left the shack, they couldn't go back. The man had warned them multiple times that they mustn't look back, no matter what.

"Let's go." Gripping the boy's hand, she stared straight ahead and stepped forward.

"Nggnnghhh..."

As soon as she started walking, she heard something like the low moan of a beast behind her, and then a loud rustle. She almost turned around without thinking, but she managed to hold herself

back. The boy looked absently forward, not seeming to have noticed anything.

You mustn't look back no matter what. She silently repeated the man's words to herself like a mantra, and as nervous as she was of whatever was back there, she kept on walking briskly forward next to the boy and never slackened her pace. Her heart pounded faster at the feeling that a beast was approaching them from behind. A large, thickset shadow blanketed the two small shadows stretching faintly out in front of them, wiping them out. Something was definitely following them.

You mustn't look back. You mustn't look back. She chanted it to herself and kept walking. The earth kept splitting around them and fragments of rock kept raining down from the sky, but those shards never fell on their heads; they scattered left and right, falling on the ground around them. Could the shadow behind them be protecting them? But what in the world was it...? The urge to turn and find out almost drove her to dart a quick glance behind her, but she remembered the man's words, and fixed her gaze straight ahead.

After a good interval of walking, an ash-gray slab of concrete came into view on the horizon. It was still small and faraway, but it was there. A platform? *That must be the station he told me about.*

"Thank goodness!"

When she smiled at the boy next to her in relief, Kieli saw the misshapen, taloned arm of a beast stretching toward his neck from behind.

The talons snagged the collar of his pajamas, and his slight body was yanked backward. A hunk of rock fully as big as the boy's own head plummeted down right in front of their eyes so close that it scraped the tip of the boy's nose. Looking totally unperturbed by his narrow escape, the boy turned his head casually to look behind him.

You mustn't look back—

"Don't!"

Kieli abruptly threw herself in front of the boy's face to cut off his line of sight and wrapped her arms around his head.

In that instant, she accidentally caught sight of the form behind them in her peripheral vision.

With her arms still around the boy, Kieli gulped. A misshapen monster like a giant rotting mass of flesh with bits of different corpses stuck to its surface looked sadly down on the two of them

with cloudy sand-colored eyes that peeped out from between folds of meat.

Owooooo!

The monster gave a roar that split the heavens. Kieli pulled at the boy's hand and tried to run, but he remained stock-still where he stood, looking expressionlessly up at the monster. It swiped out with its talons and gouged his cheek. Deep gashes opened up there, and fresh blood spattered.

Screaming, Kieli yanked hard at his hand. "Run!"

The two of them took off running, tripping and almost falling over the cracks in the ground as they went, covering their heads against the rain of rock. The monster followed them with a bellow. The gray train platform that had looked so small across the wilderness finally seemed to get closer. There was no station house or shelter; the open concrete just lay there like a long snake. Its only feature was a simple signpost standing all by itself in the middle of the platform. It said TO THE END OF THE WORLD next to a one-way arrow, just like their tickets. A steam train with a long chain of passenger cars was parked there.

Choo.....

It sounded its whistle long and low and began belching steam. Apparently it was just about to depart.

"W-wait!" she screamed at it as she ran at full speed, pulling the boy along by the hand. His foot caught on something and he toppled forward. The monster that had just caught up with them bore down with its talons for the boy's back. Kieli dove underneath them with hardly a hairbreadth to spare, whisking him to his feet and taking off running with his hand in hers again.

Chug, chug, chug...

In a puff of light-gray steam, the train began to pull slowly away from the platform. Car after car slid out of reach.

Kieli sprinted up onto the platform and managed to jump onto the ramp of the last car's deck just in time, dragging the boy up after her. The train accelerated with a lurch. Their car cleared the end of the platform not a moment before the monster caught up to them.

Then a fissure opened up in the earth right underneath the concrete platform, and it began to crumble. When Kieli leaned out over the railing of the deck and squinted, she saw the monster's great form fall into the chasm and get swallowed up by the world's

abyss.

“Ah...”

A sound escaped the boy watching with her for the first time.

“Ah...ah, ahh...”

It didn't form words. With the thin gasping of a baby looking for its mother that broke Kieli's heart, the boy reached out with both hands for the monster vanishing into the ground. When it looked as if he was about to throw himself over the railing and fall, Kieli embraced him from behind and lifted him back up. The train picked up speed as though it were trying to outrun the fissures chasing it down the track.

Holding the boy to her and panting, Kieli watched the white platform steadily disappearing into the ground for a while. The now-warped sign that had read TO THE END OF THE WORLD was the last thing to be sucked into the crevice, and the station disappeared. Behind them and on both sides of the tracks, there was nothing to see but the wilderness ever rumbling with destruction.

They'd boarded a train of no return.

“Are you okay?...Does that hurt?”

She fished a handkerchief out of her skirt pocket and pressed it gently to the awful scratches in the boy's cheek. She carefully wiped away the blood, but the four deep wounds remained swollen and festered red-black on his pale white cheek. The boy didn't look particularly bothered or pained by them; he looked right past Kieli's gaze into nothingness. It was just as if his spirit was coming to pieces along with the world...

Kieli drew her face close to his. “Harvey?”

When she whispered his name, his gaze twitched toward her just the slightest bit. Kieli pulled herself back together and took the boy's hand, squeezing tightly. “Let's go to the end of the world.”

They left the rear deck and went inside the train. They made their way forward through several cars, but there didn't seem to be any other passengers on board.

They chose a set of facing seats in a car near the middle of the train and sat down across from each other, and then all of a sudden a stocky man in a dark blue uniform stood in the aisle. She hadn't even heard him coming. His face was pale as a ghost's, and beneath the brim of the conductor's hat he'd pulled down low over his forehead, he was looking down at her with a sunny smile creepily at odds with that bloodless face.

Kieli hurriedly jammed her hand into her skirt pocket, took out the tickets she'd gotten from the man in the shack, and offered them to him. The conductor silently looked from their two tickets to their two faces. Kieli waited, wondering nervously if there was something suspicious about them, until eventually he stamped their tickets with two firm clicks and handed them back to her.

"Um, what sort of place is the end of the world? How far from here—" she started to ask, trying to get whatever information she could, but before she could finish he'd already gone silently on his way down the aisle. When she leaned out of her seat, the uniformed back of the man drifting along just slightly above the floor melted into the air around him and disappeared.

A rhythmic muted throbbing pervaded the air, but otherwise all was quiet inside the train. Outside the window the ground was splitting as fast as ever and the rain of rocks kept on falling, but the train kept right on going, indifferent to the ruin outside. It was like another dimension separate from the rest of the world.

Clackity-clack, clackity-clack... The familiar throbbing of the train that her body knew so well by now brought her an interval of rest. The boy sitting across from her was looking vacantly out the window, swinging his legs back and forth. There was an awful claw mark on his cheek. He was even more of a wreck than ever.

A train bound for the end of the world...Kieli didn't know what kind of place the "end of the world" was exactly, but whatever it was, would they be able to stop the collapse of this world when they got there? Could she help the boy?

But.

Would stopping the collapse really mean saving him...?

She felt a sudden stir of doubt. Her heart squeezed painfully.

This world was Harvey himself. Harvey was always a wreck, just like this world; he always seemed on the verge of collapse, always battered and only hanging on by a thread. Just like this boy in front of her. And even so, he was still desperately trying to patch the world up. And each time, he injured himself more instead. His whole body was battered and fragile, and even so he was still trying to resist.

Stopping the collapse of this world—wouldn't that end up meaning hurting his body even more? Wouldn't that mean him suffering even more than he already was?

I don't want to see it anymore...I don't want to see him get any

more wrecked.

With a soft pat, the boy's scraped-up hand landed on the back of Kieli's where it rested on her knee. When Kieli looked up, puzzled, he tugged on her hand as if to say: *This way, this way.* She let herself be pulled up out of her seat and deposited on the one next to his. Pressing his injured cheek to the windowpane, the boy squinted down the tracks behind the train. Kieli stuck her own cheek against the glass next to his and peered in the same direction.

An admiring sigh escaped her. "Whoa..."

A magnificent sunset painted the whole sky. On the horizon where the track disappeared into the far distance behind them, a burning scarlet sun bigger than any she'd ever seen had begun to sink beyond the edge of the land, shimmering with heat. That evening sun beautifully colored the wilderness even though the world was crumbling.

It's gorgeous, Kieli thought with simple honesty. Even as it was swallowed up by ruin, Harvey's world, this world the same copper color as his hair and eyes, was still so heartbreakingly gorgeous.

The sun hung suspended in place there, never sinking fully away, and its dying orange glow lit their faces as they pressed their cheeks and hands to the train window, spellbound by the view. The train they rode kept on going, vibrating quietly beneath them.

At some point she realized that the boy had lifted his cheek from the window and was looking at her. His coppery hair was brilliant in the setting sun. Maybe it was just a trick of the light, but Kieli thought those copper-colored eyes that hadn't shown a scrap of emotion so far were smiling at her now.

A tear slid down her cheek.

The boy cocked his head curiously, and Kieli turned her face away from him to wipe it away.

"It's nothing...I-it's just that the sunset's so beautiful..."

...This tattered, collapsing world was so beautiful, and the tattered boy who didn't speak still gave Kieli such a beautiful smile. Why? How could collapsing things be so beautiful?

It was sad, touching, heartbreaking; the tears wouldn't stop.

For a while after that, the boy just gazed out the window, swinging his feet back and forth in the shoes the man from the shack had made for him, and Kieli let the vibration of the train lull

her into a half doze. Since the boy was so bedraggled otherwise, the brand-new shoes stood out. They'd been made sturdy, to protect his frail feet. As though they carried the feelings of the man who made them for him.

A twilight wilderness where the setting sun caught on the horizon and the evening never ended: It was the perfect symbol for Harvey's world, where time had stopped. The ruin of the world flowed by outside the train window almost as if it had nothing to do with them.

Was there really no one else riding this train? She hadn't seen a single soul since that ghostly conductor from before. Kieli was just pondering whether anybody even lived in this world at all besides the boy and the man in the shack when she heard the forward connecting door open.

A young girl's innocent laughter and chatter filtered through it. Kieli popped her head out into the aisle.

A pair of small passengers closed the connecting door and walked toward them. The one in front was a girl in a skirt. She broke off talking to the other child trailing after her and turned with a flutter of her skirt to look at them.

She was a beautiful girl maybe about the same age as Kieli, with golden blond hair that flowed in gentle waves all the way down to her waist, clear ice-blue eyes, and a flattering red coat.

Becca...!

No, that's not Becca. That's...

"Beatrix?!"

Kieli half-rose from her seat without thinking. The boy acted faster, promptly jumping down from his seat and leaping out into the aisle to glom on to the girl. "Eep! You scared me. What's wrong?" she asked him, blue eyes widening at this boy who'd charged at her and latched on like a wild animal, burying his face firmly in her chest. Then she patted him gently on the head. Kieli stood up, too, and stared with both hands over her mouth and her eyes swimming with tears at the beautiful girl's face. As she patted the boy's head, the girl lifted her head and smiled at Kieli, too. "Hello!"

Kieli managed to choke out maybe half a "hello" in response to her cheery greeting.

This isn't a dream. Or, well, maybe this whole world is kind of a dream to begin with, but—this isn't a dream. She was happy, she was

confused, and the moment she opened her mouth the tears threatened to spill, so she couldn't talk right.

Kieli couldn't believe she had the chance to see her like this again: not the hideous corpse that had been sucked into the monster, but someone moving and smiling and speaking.

"Are these seats taken? Can we sit here?" the girl asked, gesturing with a glance at the seats in their box while she gently peeled away the boy clinging to her. Kieli nodded furiously, still unable to speak, and moved aside to make room for her.

That was when she finally remembered the existence of the other kid who'd stood hiding behind the girl. He was a boy even smaller than the boy Harvey, and in stark contrast to the carefree, animated girl, he wore a sort of timid scowl as he peeked at them from behind her. Kieli thought he looked about eight or nine years old. The eyes giving her an upward glare were a clear, beautiful slate color.

Is this boy Joachim...?

When the golden-haired girl and slate-eyed boy sat down with them in their set of facing seats, their almost lonely little cube of space all at once took on a lively atmosphere. Kieli and the boy Harvey sat next to each other, and Beatrix and the boy Joachim sat across from them.

The boy Joachim, the smallest of them, constantly darted glances up at the other kids with a scowl on his face. He clearly prized the paper bag he held, which seemed to be full of snacks; he never let go of it for one second. When he noticed the boy Harvey staring at it with a vaguely wistful expression, he shifted it out of sight with a start and said, "Y-you can't have any!" Beatrix whacked him over the head. The boy Joachim glared up at her with teary eyes, but apparently she was the one in charge; he only gave her a bitter look, clearly unable to backtalk her.

"Don't be mean. If you're a man, be generous and give him some."

So the boy Joachim reluctantly held out the bag to the boy Harvey as if he were doing him the world's biggest favor. The boy Harvey stuck his little hand in the bag and grabbed the biggest fistful of biscuits he could, without any restraint, without any subtlety, and without any expression on his face. "Hey!" the boy Joachim cried, horrified. He clutched the bag to his chest and looked as if he was about to burst into tears.

“You’re not getting any more! No more for you, got it?!”

The boy Harvey didn’t even appear to be listening to him. He’d already started munching away, getting biscuit crumbs all over his hands and face. Kieli and Beatrix met each other’s eyes and grinned at the boys’ childish exchange.

“How far are you going?” Beatrix asked her. Kieli glanced at the boy Harvey sitting next to her (who was cramming biscuits into his mouth like there was no tomorrow, the point of their trip seemingly forgotten even though it revolved around him).

“The end of the world.”

“Okay, then we’ll be together for part of the trip.” Beatrix beamed. Kieli smiled back, feeling heartened. She’d always been their strong, straightforward, heartening big sister.

...In the real world, though, she was gone...

In spite of herself, Kieli remembered what she’d looked like at the end, and her heart grew heavy again.

Suddenly something hit the outside of the window with a rubbery squeak. When Kieli looked, she saw a balloon animal floating there with a carefree smile on its face that dispelled the gloom. The boy Joachim, who was sitting by the window, half-rose from his seat and plastered himself to the glass. “It’s the circus!” he cried excitedly.

All sorts of different balloon animals floated lazily in the air outside the window.

A caravan of trailers that sparkled with lights of all different colors was traveling parallel to the train. Stages were set up on the sides of the trailers, and on the round platform of one of them a fat clown in a costume with a ruffled collar made balloon animals and released them into the sky. The clown’s face was painted white with blue stars: He was the one she’d met a long time ago at the carnival in Easterbury.

Trailer after trailer followed each other in a line, the artists on each of their stages giving merry performances. Balloons of all colors danced through the air as they passed. On one stage actors in giant-headed bear and mouse costumes put on a silly comedy, whacking one another and tripping and whacking one another again. In another trailer, a musical troupe decked out flamboyantly in red-and-green-striped breeches and yellow tights haphazardly played trumpets and cymbals; and in yet another, three tin dolls wearing matching sailor collars and mismatching triangular hats

colored red, green, and yellow performed an adorable dance with quick little steps. In still another trailer, a fortune-telling girl shuffled cards with a practiced hand. One of the trailers was a dining car, even, and Kieli could see dear, familiar faces: There was Suzie busily carrying trays of the “parent-and-child stew” made of poultry, eggs, and chickpeas, and there was Buzz manning the stove.

Kieli’s gloomy mood vanished. The glittering spectacle of the show on the other side of their window captivated her. Even the boy Harvey, who hardly ever changed expressions, had a faintly happy look on his face. His gaze was riveted on the succession of performances. Both his hands were pressed against the glass.

So many people she and Harvey had met on their travels together were living and breathing here in his world. She saw people among them that she didn’t know, too—people who must have featured in his life before he met Kieli. But still, the vast majority of these faces were ones Kieli knew. That made her feel a little shy, and happy, too. Happy that these few short years since he’d met Kieli, these days together that were just a tiny fraction of his long life, stuck with him so vividly that they took up most of his memories.

Sput, sput, sput.

The line of trailers gradually receded into the distance as the train overtook it, and then something else noisily approached them from behind. When Kieli brought her face up to the window and squinted, curious what it could be this time, she saw another train pulling up alongside theirs from behind. She was pretty sure there’d been only one track, but now another one was unrolling out ahead of this new train like a carpet. It was a rugged one painted in an earth-toned camouflage pattern. The boy Harvey plastered his own cheek to the glass next to Kieli’s.



“Watch out! Duck!” Beatrix’s sharp voice cried suddenly. She pushed down at Kieli’s and the boy Harvey’s heads until they dropped into a crouch below the window frame. Beatrix crouched down, too, shoving down the boy Joachim’s head the same way. Before long the camouflaged train started running alongside them at the same speed as their own train, so close that the side walls were almost scraping against each other. When Kieli just half-raised her face to peer out the window, she saw soldiers dressed in dark greatcoats with high collars peering intently into their train from just a short distance away, weapons drawn. She hastily ducked back down.

“It’s a squad of immortal soldiers,” Beatrix whispered from where they sat on the floor. “The only things they leave behind them are bodies and gunpowder smoke. They’re the worst soldiers of all—people say the plants never even grow back where they’ve been. Hold your breath, or they’ll find us. Any living human they find either gets killed or made into one of them.”

Kieli clapped both hands over her mouth as she draped her body over the boy Harvey’s to shield him. The four of them huddled together beneath the window and tried to breathe as quietly as they could. The earth-toned train on the other side of the window gradually picked up speed and overtook theirs.

Around the time Kieli really couldn’t hold her breath anymore, its very last car finally passed them.

They all sucked in huge gasps of air, raising their heads and slowly peering outside. When the final earth-toned car was gone, the track rolled up again and disappeared in just the opposite way from where it had come.

Kieli’s eyes widened in astonishment at the sight of the new scenery it left behind.

Somehow the train was now cutting through the middle of a charred battlefield. A wilderness battlefield where blood spray and gunpowder smoke hung in a thick fog along the rocky ground. People in military uniform were piled on top of one another, lying with their limbs sprawling every which way or slumped over bayonet guns and sabers; shot through the heart or stabbed in the back; all a mess of wounds and all dead. The unsinking evening sun dyed it all orange, the whole ruined battlefield where nothing

moving remained, where there was only the smell of death left, in a sort of belated homage.

The only thing moving in the sea of corpses: the arms dealer's truck matter-of-factly going through the dead soldiers' bodies and collecting the promising ones. Their train passed through the endless sea of bodies at the same unchanging speed.

"Ah...ah..."

Still gazing expressionlessly at the sea of bodies, the boy Harvey let out a wordless cry.

"Augh, ah, ahhh..."

The grieving voice was as halting as a baby's, but it tore at the hearts of everyone who heard it. Plastering himself to the window, the boy banged against the glass with both fists. He kept on banging long enough for his slender battered fists to get even more hurt. "Harvey!" Kieli hugged her arms around him from behind and forced him back away from the window. The boy kept struggling in her tight grip, reaching both hands toward the window and panting as transparent tears dribbled down that face that never held any expression.

The scars from this war still ruled a big chunk of his heart, still tormented him even now. Even after decades they hadn't faded; they were as fresh as ever and torturing him.

"Harvey, don't cry..."

Kieli cradled the crying boy's head and wished. *Don't carry all this on your shoulders anymore. Don't hurt yourself anymore. You've already been hurt enough...*

"Here," the boy Joachim said, thrusting his bag of snacks sullenly at the other boy. The boy Harvey blinked teary eyes at him in surprise. "You can have as many as you want...so don't cry," the boy Joachim spat in an undertone, looking away with a ferocious scowl on his face. When Beatrix butted in with, "Sheesh, just give him all of them," he groaned and glared not-quite-confidently at her, then steeled himself like a man bound for the firing squad and roughly shoved the whole bag into the boy Harvey's hands.

The boy Harvey gaped down at it for a second and then patted the pockets of his pajamas until he stuck his hand into one of them. To Kieli's surprise, he fished out a small object and shoved it just as roughly into the boy Joachim's hands in return. The boy Joachim's eyes went round. It was a model steamship carved out of pretty, blackly gleaming stone just the right size to fit in a child's hand.

“C-cool...! You’re giving me this?” the boy Joachim asked, his eyes gleaming. The boy Harvey nodded. Before he could even get out a “Yay,” Beatrix thwapped him and scolded, “Say ‘thank you.’”

By the time the boy Joachim mumbled “Thanks,” blushing bright red and dropping his gaze to the floor as if it was a struggle to get the word out, the boy Harvey was eating his new snacks with a look on his face that said he’d already forgotten all about the boat.

“Hey, listen to me!” yelled the boy Joachim, stricken. The boy Harvey continued to eat with an air of perfect innocence, swinging his legs back and forth. Kieli stifled a laugh.

Their relationship must have been like this ever since they were tiny. These two were the Joachim and Beatrix that Harvey held inside him. Inside Harvey, the two of them were still shining with life, moving and talking and laughing.

“Wow, look!” Beatrix cried brightly. All four of them crowded around the window and squinted out. The wilderness Kieli’d thought would go on forever had abruptly broken off, and a sandy sea spread out in front of the train. The train barreled on along an extraordinary track skimming the surface of the waves.

“Wow, we’re riding on the sea!” Kieli cried in delight. They all worked together to get the window open so they could lean out and feel the dry ocean wind whipping at their hair. It was the Sand Ocean, so infinitely, boundlessly vast that she couldn’t even make out the horizon where sea met sky. A flock of migratory birds whose pale sandy hues threatened to disappear against the color of the ocean flew in a lazy circle in the sky. For a while the four of them were wordlessly enthralled by the grand scenery.

The birds spread their wings wide and left their circuit to make a beeline for the train.

“Whoa!”

Flap flap, rustle rustle!

At the hostile sound of countless wings beating violently right next to their window, they all instinctively shrank back. When they cautiously opened their eyes, however, the birds were gathered around the boy Harvey’s bag of sweets, pecking at the biscuits.

At first they sagged, drained, and then they all looked at one another and laughed. The boy Harvey was the only one who didn’t react as the birds flocked around him. He just looked dazed.

Boom!

A distant cannon sounded, and the birds scattered in surprise. Kieli looked out the window to see two ships firing their cannons at each other in the distance. One was a rugged, sturdy-looking armored ship covered in black paint; the other was a battered little boat flying a flag with a skull and crossbones on it. She could make out soldiers in fancy white suits of armor on the black ship, and muscular men who looked like sailors wearing rough clothes and matching yellow bandannas on the skull-and-crossbones one.

“It’s a pirate ship! Yay!” The boy Joachim’s eyes shone with boyish excitement as he clutched his model boat and waved to the pirate ship with all the enthusiasm of a child that age.

“Moron!” Beatrix grabbed Joachim by the scruff of his neck as he moved to lean out the window and yanked him back inside the train car. “Don’t you know kids who get found by pirates get captured and have their hearts ripped out and sold?! Kids’ hearts are jewels. Pirates collect them.” The boy Joachim instantly turned white as a sheet and hid behind Beatrix’s back.

The children on the train all retreated to the shadows on either side of the window and watched the battle between the armored ship and the pirate ship. Kieli recognized several of the men on that pirate ship. They were the sailors from the *Sandwalker*, the heretics who believed in laying their dead to rest in the sand. The most prominent of them, the one with the manly face who stood at the prow of the ship giving orders to his minions, was Ol Han. He wore a black eye patch over one eye, and the arm he waved to give his men the order to fire the cannons ended in a hook instead of a hand. He really did look like a pirate captain straight out of one of those old stories. She saw Ka Rif, the low-ranking shipmate who’d been so kind to her, too.

Kieli darted a glance at the profile of the boy pressed cheek to cheek with her watching the pirate ship. He had his eyes glued to the battle between the two ships, but his facial expression was as spaced-out as ever.

The armored ship’s cannon dealt a direct hit to the pirate ship’s deck, which listed sharply. The men standing on it screamed in their deep voices.

The boy Harvey let out a soft cry.

He gripped the window frame with both hands and stared at the pirate ship as if he were silently cheering it on: *Hang in there! You can do it!* The pirate ship fired back with its own cannon and

opened up a great hole in the hard bottom of the armored ship. This time the boy Harvey opened his mouth wide in a sort of silent *Yay!* and leaned out of the window.

Before they knew it, Kieli and the others were rooting for the pirate ship right along with him. “Go pirates! You can do it! Shoot!” they cheered, pumping their fists. These were the same pirates who supposedly collected children’s hearts, but when all was said and done, the pirates in storybooks were always the ones children adored. And they were a necessary ingredient for any satisfying great adventure.

The pirate ship successfully sank the armored one, and all the children joined hands and cheered “Hooray!”

Captain Ol Han with his black eye patch and hook noticed them from his position at the tip of the deck. He pointed the silver gun he held in his flesh hand at the sky and fired a round, pointing straight at their train with his hook and bellowing, “I see children! Catch ’em! A reward for anyone who gets a jewel!”

The pirates’ war cry echoed through the sky on the heels of the gunshot. Shrieking, the children pulled back into the train car. The ship unfurled its sails all the way and started coming after the train.

It cut across the surface of the Sand Ocean until it caught up and began running side by side with the train, and Captain Ol Han’s hook reached in through the window to grab the boy Joachim’s collar. He hoisted the boy up with no trouble at all. The boy Harvey promptly grabbed on to his feet, and both boys’ slight bodies were fished out of the train through the window.

“Harvey! Joachim!”

Kieli and Beatrix leaned outside, too, and tried to rescue them, but they were already too far away. As they were raised aloft by Captain Ol Han’s hook, the two boys tried to squirm and kick their way free. The violently churning surface of the Sand Ocean spread beneath their feet.

“Quit yer flailing, runts!” the captain hissed, pointing his silver gun at the boy Harvey’s head.

Bang!

A shot rang out. The boy Harvey’s right eye flew apart like a chunk of sand. He lost his grip on the boy Joachim’s legs, and his pajama-clad body plunged headfirst toward the sea.

“Harvey!”

Kieli reflexively threw herself out the train window and dove

after him. She was sucked into the sand swirling on the surface almost immediately. The flow of sand pretty much had her at its mercy, but she still managed to grab the drowning boy's wrist just before he slipped out of reach. The fierce whirlpool of sand forced her eyelids closed and jostled them both this way and that.

And then before Kieli knew it, instead of the sand she remembered diving into, the two of them were being sucked under by real, turbid water. It was just like when she'd fallen into the underground waterway in Gate Town and black, heavy water like sludge had clung to all her limbs.

Wait, I can't swim...!

Panic took over her mind and brought her even closer to drowning. Still, in the midst of it all she held on to the boy's hand for dear life.

I'll never let go, no matter what, she thought firmly. Under the water where she couldn't see it, she managed to just barely feel the boy's wrist in her hand.

It suddenly struck her that the two of them had held hands like this many times before. She thought of the smiles of the people she'd seen performing in those trailers earlier. Harvey wasn't the only one who'd enshrined them in his heart as precious memories. They were even more than that to Kieli: they were the most precious memories of all, the ones that took up most of the space in her own life so far. And in all those memories, it was his hand that had always been there next to her. All along, ever since the first time they'd held hands that day he came to find her in the carnival town in Easterbury...When Kieli had reached out a hand to Harvey the day they met up again at the transfer station and he was sitting all battered and bruised at the bottom of the stairs, and when she'd hauled Harvey to the boat with the wire after he'd fallen into the Sand Ocean and then helped him up into it, and when she'd reached out to Harvey the day she went to get him at the spaceship ruins after he'd been missing and said *Let's go home*, and after they'd met up again in Gate Town after six months apart, when she'd run up the station steps to take Harvey's offered hand.

This hand of his had always been there with her. Sometimes Kieli'd taken it so she wouldn't get left behind, and sometimes Harvey'd offered it to her to help her. And sometimes she'd clung desperately to it, determined not to let go of the tattered man who seemed as though he could blink out of existence any moment.

Don't let go...

A voice flowed into her consciousness.

The clear voice of a girl. Beatrix's voice...?

Don't let go of his hand. He made it this far only because you've been holding on to him with all your might—

Kieli gripped the boy's hand even tighter in answer. As the cloudy black water tossing them about robbed them of their sight, their eyes met for just an instant.

I won't let go!

She couldn't say it out loud. But in her heart she thought it loud and clear, and she nodded to the boy to let him know. His hand squeezed hers back.

Then, out of nowhere, she felt a force abruptly shoving her upward from below. It swiftly propelled their bodies toward the surface of the muddy water that had them at its mercy.

By the time they broke the surface and regained their sight to look around them, the black water of the underground waterways had transformed itself back into the Sand Ocean again.

When Kieli looked down to see what had brought them up to safety, her eyes widened into saucers. Rising from the ocean, avalanches of sand cascading from its bumpy, coarse-skinned body, was a gigantic tube-shaped monster like a great segmented worm. A *sandworm*—!

She wasn't sure which end was the head, but on the one she *thought* was the sandworm's head she saw the boy Joachim riding, too.

The sandworm's great, long body swam effortlessly along the surface with Kieli, the boy Harvey, and the boy Joachim hanging on to its bumps. It left a wake of sand behind it as it outstripped the pirate ship chasing after them and firing on them with cannons. It sped across the sand to pull up alongside the train and eventually reached the train car window Beatrix was sticking her head out of.

With Beatrix's help, the three of them managed to tumble through the window into the car.

Then it was time for a coughing fit.

They sat up as quickly as they could, though, even before they'd

finished panting and coughing up all the sand in their mouths, and looked out the window. The sandworm was stretching its long body up from out of the ocean and getting in the pirate ship's way, sending huge waves of sand rolling toward it from all directions. The one-eyed, prosthetic-handed Captain Ol Han, Ka Rif, and all the other pirates were hanging on to their listing deck for dear life.

Kieli and the others stuck out their tongues at the pirate ship as it beat a hasty retreat, and then they all waved together at the sandworm that had rescued them, calling, "Thank you! Good-byye!"

Beatrix's parting shot at the pirates was, "Kids' hearts are treasures, and that makes them too good for *you!*" They all doubled over laughing. The pirate ship and the sandworm gradually grew farther away across the sand until they faded from sight, still fighting, and the train rushed straight down the track on the sand as before.

The boy Harvey's right eye was still gone. It was as if it'd been part of a doll made of hard sand and had just crumbled away when the bullet loosened it. When Kieli gazed sadly at his now even more injured face, he just looked back at her with his expressionless copper left eye, seeming as unconcerned about his own body as ever.

Then without warning he thumped his own forehead lightly against hers.

She could feel the warmth from his pale forehead, slight but certain.

Almost like a message: *I'm okay.*

"You've been holding on to him..." Beatrix's gentle voice said overhead. "That's how he made it this far. He managed to pull through this far without giving up. And he still hasn't given up yet." *He hasn't given up yet. He's trying to live*—This was just like what the radio had told her. When she drew her forehead away from the boy's and looked up, she saw a soft smile in Beatrix's blue eyes. "Thanks for tugging him along this far. Keep taking care of him, okay?"

Without Kieli noticing it happen, suddenly the never-ending sunset was gone, and the blue-gray color of night was beginning to take over the sky. The boy Joachim pressed his hands against the window glass and peered outside with clear eyes the same color as that sky.

Against the backdrop of the slate-blue sea, Kieli made out what looked like the remains of ships, masts, and the tips of sails, jutting up from the sand at all angles. There were other things, too. Smallish things like sabers and bayonet guns, stuffed animals and toy cars. Bigger things like rusted train cars and clock towers, tanks and trucks...

“Is this...the final destination of the Sand Ocean...?”

The Sand Ocean Graveyard, where they said everything set adrift on the flowing sands went in the end.

The sounds of the sliding sand and the dry wind that blew over the ocean were both gone; even the sound of the train’s wheels on the track had been sucked away, and the sea had come to a complete halt, as if time had left them behind in a ruined world so soundless that it hurt Kieli’s ears.

There were many, many things she recognized here. The clockwork dolls that sang and danced back in the park in Westerbury, the remains of the park’s trolley trucks, a radio tower covered in red-brown rust...And off in the distance, even the remains of a giant dilapidated spaceship that looked almost like a bayonet gun stuck upright in the sand. The hazy light of the twin moons hanging beyond the thin slate clouds picked out the outlines of all sorts of different things and cast their long, thin, bluish shadows on the sand.

Everything that the long life of this world’s owner had left behind, or that had passed by it to die before him, must be here now...Kieli leaned out over the window frame and watched the endless moonlit driftage—the grave markers for all the many people and things that had touched his life, however slightly, before dying away and coming to rest here.

Eventually a white platform came into view among the driftage. In the exact center of the platform stood a lone gas lamp bleeding dull, yellowish light. The train on its oversea track slowed its speed and pulled into the station.

“Okay, then,” said Beatrix, getting up from her seat and nudging the boy Joachim. “We have to get off here.”

“What?” Startled, Kieli turned her head to look up at them. “You’re getting off...?”

“Mm-hmm. But you two have to keep on moving. You’ve got a ways to go on your journey yet.”

The boy Harvey jumped out of his seat and jogged over to

Beatrix, yanking her sleeve in a wordless plea for her to stop. This child who almost never asserted himself was suddenly shaking his head and almost throwing a tantrum. Beatrix patted the peevish boy's head awkwardly.

Kieli was equally at a loss for what to do with him, but she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pulled him away from Beatrix anyway. He wiped his cheeks with his pajama sleeve. His tears were infectious, and Kieli felt them welling up in her own eyes, too.

"Beatrix, please stay..."

The girl shook her head. "I'm sorry. I just can't." A sad-looking smile danced in her blue eyes. "The two of you have to go it alone from here. I can't help out anymore. We've already retired from the stage of your travels."

"Retired from the stage...?" *Oh...that's right.* Kieli almost forgot it sometimes, but it was true: In reality she wouldn't be able to journey with these two anymore. She couldn't get help from Beatrix anymore. She couldn't go to her for someone to talk to, or ask for her advice, or fight with her anymore.

Beatrix was selfish and she talked big and she was bossy and she was hopeless with money, but Kieli had loved her. Kieli had taken as much secret pride in her strength and beauty as if they'd been her own.

Choking back a sob, she forcefully wiped away her tears. She held on to the boy Harvey as he wailed. Now, Kieli would have to be stronger. So she could get even the littlest bit closer to her friend's strength. So she could protect what she wanted to protect. "Thank you for everything, Beatrix...I love you..."

What she really wanted was to thank her directly in the real world. She decided to be grateful, though, for the chance to say now what she hadn't been able to before. Maybe getting to take this short trip with them again at the end was a little unconscious gift from the owner of this world.

The boy Joachim looked reluctant to leave, but Beatrix tugged him by the hand, and they made their way out through the connecting door, leaving Kieli and the boy Harvey behind. At the last moment, the boy Joachim turned around, held up the model boat he'd gotten from the boy Harvey, and waved. "Bye-bye."

Kieli and the boy Harvey went back to their set of seats and stuck their heads out the window. They saw the two of them step

down onto the white platform that stood all alone in the sea of driftage. Belching steam, the train began to pull away from the platform again.

Kieli leaned out the window and waved to them as hard as she could. The boy Harvey leaned out, too. The train picked up speed and sent his coppery hair flying every which way.

“Beatrix! The good-luck charm got broken! I’m sorry!” Kieli shouted at the top of her lungs as she waved.

The train was picking up speed; the wind tore away the sound of Kieli’s voice. But *she* waved back with a smile and shouted back just the same, “Well, you don’t need it anymore, do you? You got to see Ephraim, after all—” The sight of the girl and boy standing side by side and seeing them off in the glow of the gaslight on the platform receded into the distance behind them.



And so the train carrying Kieli and the boy, leaving all kinds of things behind and feeling each individual loss, began driving down the track on the sand once again. Their tears mingled together as the wind took them before scattering them in the night sky.



Now that it was just the two of them in the train again, all at once it was only about a tenth as noisy. It felt awfully quiet. Outside the window, it was nighttime. *Clackity-clack, clackity-clack...* Rhythmic throbbing and the dull soft glow coming from the train-car lights gently enveloped their set of facing seats, but everything else was dark.

A round ball of fire drifted by outside their window. Wondering what it could be, Kieli pressed her face against the glass and squinted out at the night sea.

“Ah...!”

That’s not the sea—! Somewhere along the way the train had pulled past the Sand Ocean, and now it was running on tracks that floated in nothingness. There was no ground and no sky and no way to tell where the horizon was; only a dizzying pitch-black void surrounding them on all sides. Two enormous spheres of rugged rock were floating so close to the train that Kieli was afraid they might collide.

Are those the twin moons...?

When she pressed her cheek to the window pane, she saw that they were riding on an arcing track suspended in the void, and behind them on that track floated a huge sand-colored planet wrapped in a hazy layer of atmosphere. Fragments of rock streaming past their window were pulled in by the planet’s gravity, catching fire as they plummeted toward it. One after another after another after another, balls of flame were sucked down to the planet far below Kieli.

Before her eyes, one of the twin moons floating in the void split clean in half without a sound. A chunk of it became a giant meteor wreathed in flame and plummeted toward the planet just like the other balls of fire.

The world—it's starting to completely break down—

The air inside the train began vibrating wildly. She realized that while her mind was elsewhere, the ruin of the world had finally begun to overtake even the train itself. When she checked out the window, the cars at the back of the train were breaking off one by one without a sound, just like the moon, becoming nothing but pitiful fiery wreckage.

“Oh no...!”

Taking the boy Harvey's hand, Kieli stood up from her seat and rushed out into the aisle. They ran away from the destruction toward the front of train. It was all they could do. The boy behind Kieli fell after a particularly abrupt shake of the floor, and she crashed down with him. As she tried to help him up, the floor cracked and a gaping hole opened up at the boy's feet. His body started to disappear into the gap. Just in time, Kieli threw her upper body over the edge and grabbed his arms. Then she opened her eyes wide.

The boy's body was cracking, too, as if in sync with the ruin of the train, and beginning to crumble away like dry sand. Chunks of his arms and legs fell off.

“No, not yet! Hang in there!”

Kieli used every ounce of her strength to haul the boy's body up, and they took off together in a stumbling run.

Then the boy suddenly gave Kieli's hand a sharp tug. Stumbling backward a little, she turned around and followed the path of the boy's gaze to look out the window. A misshapen sphere of rock was coming into view like a solitary island in the sea, radiating a muted, hazy light in the center of pitch-black outer space.

Somehow the train managed to pull up alongside the lonely platform even though most of its wheels were gone. That body of rock was rumbling violently, just as the wilderness had been before, with fissures forming here and there across the land.

The boy Harvey jumped down onto the cracked and crumbling platform ahead of Kieli, and she followed after him. It looked about to break down and be swallowed up by the ground any second. When she stepped outside, the sky above her was a jet-black void with no atmosphere separating her from it. Shooting star after shooting star rained down around them. Near the middle of the cracked platform stood a tilted sign. Printed on it in a scratchy font were the same words that had been on the tickets, the words

proclaiming this place THE END OF THE WORLD.

On the far side of the platform Kieli saw what looked like a giant stake sticking up at an angle. The boy Harvey jumped off the platform and went running up to it. When he got there, he put both hands around the stake and tried to pull it out of the ground. That iron stake, like a thick tree trunk, was so big the boy's arms only just barely fit around it; he obviously wouldn't have an easy time prying it out with his small, powerless arms. As if to mock his efforts, it only bit even further into the rock, forcing the crevice in the ground wider. Each time, the world rumbled its scream of agony. Fragments of rock raining down from the sky mercilessly struck the boy's shoulders and arms. Still the boy clung to the stake, gritting his teeth, and tried to hold together his crumbling world, his wrecked self.

A bit of falling rock slammed into his shoulder, and it turned to sand and crumbled away. He fell to his knees with a little cry. The ground shook violently, the world synching with the boy. The stake bit even deeper into the land, and the world screamed.

The boy crouching on the ground collected sandy shards of his own scattered body and began using them to fill in the gouge that the stake had dug into the land. Each time a stone struck him and he lost a piece of his body, he picked up the fragments of himself and went about repairing the ground with them. On top of the eye and shoulder he was already missing, he lost an arm, a knee, a shin...Little by little, the boy's whole existence was flaking away. And still he didn't stop working to repair the world.

"Stop..." Kieli whispered hoarsely where she stood frozen behind him. She ran up to him, tripping whenever the land shook along the way. She threw her arms around the small back that just kept on getting smaller as pieces of it crumbled away and shouted, "It's enough. Stop! Please, just...just stop working so hard...!" She wrapped her arms around his shoulders as she begged him.

When that ghost girl had shown her what Harvey's body was like inside, she'd directly seen, felt, *known* just how wrecked it was, and it had left her terror-stricken. But in spite of it all, his body had struggled to stitch his veins and skin and bone and muscle and nerves, his very self, back together. *It's too much, it's too much, just...*

The boy shook off Kieli's arms, though, and his small body, so wrecked now that he was almost beyond recognition, silently collected up the fragments of himself and filled in the ground with

them as he tried to get it to hold out as long as possible. He tried to fix the collapsing world.

“Harvey!” Kieli screamed tearfully as she sank to the ground. “Just stop...! I don’t want to see you like this; I can’t take it anymore!” she cried, covering her face with both hands and shaking her head.

The moment Kieli said those words, the boy who’d just ignored her presence up until now stopped what he was doing and turned to look at her for the first time since he’d started working.

He stood still, letting his hands fall limply at his sides, and his face started to crumble away. It started around his missing right eye and seemed to drag his whole body after it: It turned to sand and began to break down. The land shook even harder than before—so hard that Kieli could hardly stay sitting upright no matter how desperately she held on. The stake bit in deep, pushing the rift in the ground open wide in the blink of an eye.

Don’t let go...

Beatrix’s clear voice echoed in her mind again.

No, you can’t give up. You can’t be the one to let go of his hand. Please, don’t turn your eyes away.

Never turn your eyes away. That’s what Beatrix had said to her in the cathedral. Kieli raised her face with a start. The boy on the verge of losing himself was looking at her with sad, pleading eyes.

“Harvey...”

Wiping away her tears and pressing her lips resolutely together, Kieli stood up. Standing as firmly as she could on the shaking ground, she stumbled over to stand next to the boy. Reaching out from beside him, she wound both arms around the stake piercing the ground and held it. She hugged it securely in her arms as though she were supporting his body itself.

“...Okay. It’s all right; I’ll hold you up. I won’t let go, no matter what.”

A bit of falling rock slammed into Kieli's shoulder. Still Kieli clung to the stake, gritting her teeth.

"Let's hang in there. Let's do this together. You're not alone, so let's work together. I won't give up, okay? I won't give up!"

When they'd fallen into the Sand Ocean together only a little while ago, she'd vowed in her heart never to let go of his hand, no matter what. If Kieli's strength was holding him up, if he needed her, she wouldn't let go come hell or high water. She wouldn't give up. She wouldn't turn her eyes away.

The ruin that had been eating away at the boy stopped.

He looked up at her with his one remaining copper eye. As she kept on supporting the stake, Kieli nodded emphatically back at him.

Kieli held the stake's weight, and the boy repaired the fissure in the ground by filling it with broken bits of his own body. The two of them kept on working and working, trying their best to slow down the ruin as much as they could so that the world wouldn't end. Single-mindedly, losing all sense of time and self, they held the world together.



It was quiet. *Ba-dum, ba-dum...* The sound of a heartbeat dimly permeated the air.

Kieli found herself slumped on the ground at the base of the stake with her arms still wrapped around it. At some point she'd fallen asleep with her cheek pressed against it. She opened her eyes slowly, squinting at the sudden bright light and blinking.

The rumble of the world's collapse that had dominated Kieli's hearing for so long was gone, and everything was awfully silent. The gentle arc of this little planet's horizon sprawling at the far reaches of her vision was starting to lighten. Faint, soft light began to filter through the vault of space that had been blanketed in pitch-black darkness so far.

She groggily lifted her cheek from the stake and sat up straight, tracing the stake upward with her gaze. It had stopped still here without widening the fissure in the ground any further. The earth tremors and fissures that had rumbled all around them had calmed, too, and there weren't any meteorites raining down on them either.

She only heard the occasional pattering of tiny falling rocks like an aftertaste of the storm.

The world's collapse had stopped.

Kieli looked around her with a start. "Harvey!"

She saw a pair of slim legs lying on the ground on the other side of the stake from her, one of them still wearing a shoe. When she crawled over, clinging to the stake for support, she found a boy in tattered pajamas lying there as still as the dead. A chill ran down Kieli's spine.

"Harvey...?" she ventured tentatively. The boy lying limply on the ground cracked open an eyelid. An empty copper eye turned toward her. She took a relieved breath and lent the boy a hand to help him up. His body was horribly light, but it was *here*—he hadn't broken or disappeared; he existed here in her arms right now.

They sat down on the ground side by side and leaned their backs against the base of the stake in the earth. The narrow rays at the horizon gradually expanded, piercing the pitch-dark sky with a soft light.

"It stopped, huh? I...wonder if that means we're saved..."

At Kieli's half-formed question, the boy silently raised his face up to look at the stake overhead and then lowered it to survey the various parts of his own body. Miraculously, the missing parts were gradually returning to the way they'd been: a tide of sand coming into shore. The crevices in his body began to fill, catching and reflecting little twinkles of light as they went. For a while the boy stared wonderingly down at his hands, experimentally making rock-paper-scissors gestures a few times, even, before lifting his eyes to look at Kieli. The sand-colored light shining on this little planet lit his face just enough to let her see it break into a soft smile.

A familiar scent wafted in on the breeze. The scent of their planet, wreathed in coppery wilderness and ashen smog.

Choo.....

The train parked by the cracked platform sounded its whistle. Ash-colored vapor drifted toward them on the wind. Along with the vapor came the faint sound of static-filled music—the bouncy tones of stringed instruments, coming from the radio.

As if drawn to the music, the two of them took each other's hands and stood up. The wrecked train that was down to just a few cars now puffed steam, waiting for them to board. They looked at each other and smiled. The smoggy wilderness wind caressed their

cheeks.

“Want to go home?”

Joining hands, they started walking toward the train.

Let's go home.

Let's keep up this journey together a little farther, a little farther.



Ba-dum. Ba-dum...

She could feel the warmth of someone's body heat against her right hand. *Ba-dum. Ba-dum...* The sound of a slowly pulsing heartbeat traveled faintly along her fingers into her consciousness. When she opened her tightly shut eyes one by one, Kieli saw the big palm and long angular fingers wrapped around her own right hand—she would have recognized that beloved left hand anywhere.

The radio's speaker was playing them a stream of noise at low volume. It didn't quite form music, but it had a lilt to it like a lullaby. Just like the melody that had come to escort them back home in the end, the one coming from inside the train at the end of the world.

Kieli lifted her cheek from the cold floor of the colonnade and sat up. Her eyes fell on the hand linked to hers and slowly traveled up. There was the long arm that always protected Kieli. The lean, battered body crashed out on the ground next to her. Copper-colored curls lying sloppily against the nape of his neck. And when she let her eyes travel even farther, his coppery right eye and dark brown left eye: They looked a little vacant and kind of listless, but there was unmistakably light and awareness in them as they gazed up at her face.

Kieli felt his hand squeeze hers, a little weakly still. His dry lips moved a fraction.

“I...”

The scratchy murmur ended there, but it sounded like a question.

“Mm-hmm. What is it?” Kieli whispered tenderly. She brought her ear to his lips as he tried to speak.

“...I couldn't see anything, I couldn't move, and I was alone in a dark place for a long time...and I wondered if maybe this was the end...and I got...scared. But I could hear your voice somewhere in

the distance. I heard your voice calling me the whole time. So, I couldn't see very well, but I walked toward your voice, Kieli...and I tripped and fell sometimes...but I could hear your voice the whole time, so I could walk here without getting lost..." His halting words went straight to Kieli's heart, and tears formed in her eyes. She shook her head to stop him from saying anything else, gripping his left hand in both of her own and pressing her forehead to it.

"Mm-hmm...Welcome home, Harvey."

Ba-dum. Ba-dum...

With her face this close, she could just make out his heartbeat. It was weak, but it was undeniably there.

The blue-gray night was already half-gone, and the capital was still in chaos. And yet right now, she felt as if it would all work out somehow. She felt as though, as long as the owner of the hand in hers stayed with her, right now she could do anything.

Episode 3: Mother

“He” was wandering through a world of deep, thick fog. “He” didn’t know who “he” was, and no voice told him, either. Nor did “he” know where “he” was supposed to be going. “He” just moved on instinct, like a wild animal, tracking his food.

Ba-dum, ba-dum... The pulsing stones housing amber light were his food supply, and they made his body bigger and stronger. Each time “he” absorbed a stone, someone’s screams echoed in his head. The voices accumulating inside him were always just more pained screams and moans for help; “he” couldn’t find a voice that would lead him out of the fog. “He” was still walking in the fog, searching for that voice.

A little while ago, “he” had heard one lone voice calling him. Had that been his name? “He” groped through his hazy consciousness for the memory: What name had the voice used?

Jude—

When that voice penetrated his mind, for just a split second, something burst in his head.

A white yard blanketed in gunpowder smoke. A half-ruined gray building. A half-collapsed wall of blocks. A chin-up bar crushed out of shape. A tiny smoldering sand pit. A young redheaded boy crouching, back hunched, piling up rocks in one corner of the schoolyard. And another boy watching him work. And then “him,” watching them from afar.

A fragment of memory flickered back to life. “He” had never expected to encounter those boys again as his comrades when they’d grown up. His conscience tormented him. First he’d taken the young children’s lives, and now he was about to make the boys who’d survived and grown do the same things he’d done. In his heart, “he” vowed to be their honorable and devoted superior. That wouldn’t erase his sins, of course. It was the sentence “he” imposed on himself for crimes too great to ever atone for, even if “he” spent his whole eternal life trying.

Ksssshhhhhhhh...

In some corner of his consciousness, there was a low sound like a machine gauge going past the red zone. “He” detected an energy mass resonating with his heart, one even bigger than his heart, which was already greatly swollen. If “he” took that into himself, “he” would grow more, and gain knowledge, and maybe he could get out of this fog.

Slowly, “he” started walking. “He” pushed through the slight feeling of repulsion that happened when like poles of two magnets were brought together, dragging along the lump of cables and pipes and carrion that his body had become as “he” made his way toward the mass of energy hovering at the edge of his consciousness. One step. Another step. Whoever got in his way he slayed, and ate, and made into his own flesh.

At that time, “he” had no concept of his own ugliness. “He” was unaware that his body had become as horribly ugly and misshapen as his name.

His was the name of the criminal who betrayed the Messiah. The name of one who carried a lifelong burden of sin.



“How are you feeling, Lord Sigri?” he asked the Elder who’d just awoken on the cot next to him. Sigri blinked vaguely a few times and then squinted sternly up at him for a while before his expression finally relaxed. Julius supposed he couldn’t see very well without the glasses he usually wore.

“Julius, eh? Where are we?”

“The Security Forces’ crisis headquarters. I think my father will be back here soon, too.”

Julius carefully kept his tone calm, wary of startling the injured man. He didn’t know how much that was worth, though, since the bustle of foot traffic in the hallway outside created a never-ending muffled din. It would be easy enough for the older man to figure out from the atmosphere that the situation wasn’t good.

“What about my daughter and...him?”

Sigri hesitated midway through the question, apparently not sure how to refer to the Undying. Julius ended up hesitating a little, too (he himself had never referred to him as anything but “that

guy” or “you”), before he answered. “They went to look for one of their friends. The woman who was staying at your house, I believe.”

“Friends...I see...” Sigri echoed slowly, as if savoring the taste of the words in his mouth. “They’re my daughter’s friends, aren’t they? So my daughter has something wonderful, then, something I don’t have...” he muttered to himself. Julius thought he heard pride in his voice.

“...Lord Sigri,” Julius said slowly after a moment’s hesitation. Sigri looked up quizzically.

“Rumor has it you repeated my father’s message word for word during the uproar in the cathedral.” He’d heard the reports. People said Father Sigri, the Eleventh Elder on the Council of Elders and the highest-ranking priest in the Preaching Department, had taken leave of his senses, called a normal believer names, and shouted abuse at the Council of Elders.

There was a pause, and then Sigri let out a dry laugh. “Ahaha. That felt good.”

Julius couldn’t help laughing with him. They looked at each other, laughing oddly cheerfully together.

“Julius, sir. Your father’s come back,” reported a soldier who appeared in the doorway. The confused riot outside the room had calmed down some, replaced by a mild sense of relief and the comfortable focused tension that came from trust. The father Julius respected gave his men that kind of high morale. The Elder in charge of the Security Forces was already gone, a victim of the recent string of Elder deaths, and in the discord among the Church leaders a successor hadn’t been named yet, which meant that for all practical purposes his father currently bore right of command over the whole army.

Julius’s father appeared through the narrow doorway of the little room they were using as a makeshift infirmary clanging with the weapons of war, carrying a rifle and saber and decked out in full-body armor plating under the officer’s greatcoat he wore. The pure-white greatcoat that was the emblem of the Church Soldiers was filthy with scorch marks from torches and black coal-tar-like fluid. Julius could see his exhaustion as he wiped sweat from his forehead with his glove, but when he looked at Julius and Sigri he gave them his usual bright, cheerful smile.

“Sigri. Glad you’re all right.”

“I wouldn’t exactly say ‘all right,’” Sigri said sardonically,

sitting up in bed with a protective hand on his right shoulder. Julius helped him. "If you've got one head and four limbs all still attached, you're plenty all right," his father said, laughing him off unsympathetically. At that, Sigri gave a little burst of laughter himself.

"Can't argue with that." Then, in a melancholy voice, he murmured, "...I suppose there were a lot of deaths."

The mood of the room grew heavier at that.

"What's the situation?"

"As you can see, it's not good," Julius's father answered sourly as he set down his weapons. "We've finished evacuating the people who were left on the streets, but apparently there's a group still stranded in the cathedral. I sent a rescue team."

"And the monsters?"

"They just keep on coming," he spat, and then suddenly fixed a glare on Sigri. "You know where those things came from, don't you, Sigri?" he demanded with a harshness that rode the line between question and condemnation. Julius's father didn't give people that truly sharp look very often. If Sigri had been one of his subordinates, he probably would've gone pale as a ghost and frozen stiff on the spot. Sigri, however, accepted it with a serious face and without turning his eyes away.

"...Certain of the Elders were attempting to manufacture Undyings. Those things are the defective products."

"Ma—" Julius blurted, on the verge of interrupting the adults' conversation, but the charged mood around them proved too much for him, and he fell silent. *Manufacture Undyings?!* His father had evidently guessed this already. He didn't look particularly surprised, and his glare didn't soften.

"You didn't take part, I assume?" his father pressed.

Meeting his gaze head-on, Sigri shook his head. "I didn't take part, no. But..."

"But you stood by and watched, is what you're saying."

"...Yes."

As soon as the word was out of Sigri's mouth, his father's fist shot past right in front of Julius's eyes and slammed square into the Elder's bony jaw. Sigri's body slammed hard into the wall next to the cot.

"D-dad!"

Julius rushed between them and tried to help Sigri up, but Sigri

waved off his hand. "It's fine." He sat up on his own, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth. "Good thing I wasn't wearing my glasses. You would've broken them," he accused, which wasn't exactly what most people would consider the appropriate response. His father replied with equal breeziness. "Lucky for you, I guess." He was shaking his fist out lightly. The only one upset here was Julius. Those two were completely unruffled.

"It's been a long time since I took one of your punches. Since Setsuri, I think."

"Well, it wouldn't do to deck an *Elder*. I hit extra hard to make up for all the times I've had to hold back."

"I *am* still an Elder, you know..." Sigri replied, hunching his shoulders.

"Well, if you ask me, the Elders can all eat shit." Julius's father dismissed him flatly, looking strangely proud of himself.

"Reporting in, sir!" cried one of the soldiers, dashing into the room. All eyes turned to him. Looking a little intimidated, he bowed and gave his report. "We have word that a walking energy mass of unknown origin has broken into the energy tower and destroyed portions of it in the process. Energy supply in those portions is coming to a halt."

"The energy tower?"

As they all exchanged wary looks, the light illuminating the room abruptly went out. Julius's field of vision was blanketed in darkness, and he could just barely make out the shadowy outlines of the people in the room with him. With the uneasy feeling that he'd been suddenly tossed into a void, he looked around apprehensively. It was the middle of the night by now; fighting back against the monsters without light would be fatal.

"Scrape together all the lights you can find! Torches, lanterns, anything!"

His father's reassuringly powerful voice sent the other soldiers running out of the room to follow their orders. He didn't show any signs of agitation even now.

Julius heard sounds of commotion from all the groups of soldiers outside. Somewhere off in the distance, the howling of a beast echoed.

"Julius, you stay put. Take care of Sigri for me."

"Dad—"

His father took up his weapons and dashed out of the room.

Julius watched him go, unable to stop him, and then groped his way quickly to the window. In the flickering torchlight at the base of the tower he could make out soldiers running to and fro along the walls.

A shiver ran all the way down his spine at the sight of the scene outside.

Their headquarters tower was completely surrounded by a pack of monsters. Body after slack, rotting body shimmered in the light of the orange torch flames. Stooped forward and swaying slowly left and right, step by step they closed in on the tower.

That day, the last and longest in the capital's history, wasn't over yet.

And while Julius doubted any divine miracle had ever occurred before in this city of God on the graveyard, that day would be remembered for the advent of a true miracle...



Kieli sat beside Beatrix's pitiful remains one more time, looking down at her and combing through her hair with her fingers, that hair that was so beautiful even cut short.

Beatrix...

Kieli began to speak silently to her.

I didn't let go of his hand. And I never will, either, no matter what. Because you told me what to do, Beatrix. Thank you...

Kieli stroked her cheek one last time and then laid Harvey's coat over her.

They'd found what appeared to be a little painting storeroom nearby, and they'd carried Beatrix's body inside. Lots of canvases of religious paintings stood propped against the walls, not framed yet. The smell of oil paint permeating the room calmed her somehow. It was just like the smell in Sigri's house...in the house where she was born.

...Maybe it was the slow but steady passage of time doing it, but she realized that somewhere along the way she'd almost begun to accept that fact without even thinking about it. She didn't know how to feel about that.

"Are we leaving Beatrix here?" Kieli asked, turning to face Harvey where he waited by the wall near the door. He nodded.

"Yeah. We still have things to do..."

Nonetheless, Harvey stayed slumped on the floor holding one hand to his chest and looking as if it still hurt a little just to talk. Kieli was pretty sure moving would be a lot more of a trial. But in his mind's eye, it wasn't this place Harvey was seeing. He was looking somewhere else. The direction Jude had walked off in. Even if he couldn't physically see the departing back of the man who was at once his old friend and his enemy, he was still fixing his sight on it all the way from here.

Kieli thought that really, Harvey had probably already forgiven Jude. The Jude in Harvey's world was a cobbler who lived a quiet life watching over the gravestones in his yard, and a criminal tormented by regret, and the boy who was that world itself hadn't blamed Jude at all. There was no way Harvey actually wanted to raise a hand to his old friend, to turn on one of his own.

He was bottling up his own feelings, though, and preparing to settle things with Jude. Not to take his revenge, but to free an old friend trapped in a life of guilt.

And Kieli...Kieli hadn't thought she'd forgiven her father yet. But she realized that as time went on, her feeling of instinctive rejection was starting to fade. Had she already forgiven him, deep down, and her mind was just being stubborn about it now? Had Kieli managed to forgive her father, just like Harvey'd forgiven Jude? She couldn't really figure out how she felt.

She thought she'd like to talk with that man. He'd traveled with her mother, Setsuri; he might know. Know how her mother had felt about her father, Sigri, and whether she hadn't hated him anymore...

She'd been lost in thought, staring at the floor, but now Kieli steeled herself and raised her face.

"Harvey, you're still in pain, right? I'll go get you some water."

It came out sounding sharp, almost as though she was picking a fight, and Harvey gave her a funny look.

"Nah, I don't need any. Let's get moving."

"It's okay. A little while ago I found a water fountain nearby, so I'll go straight there and come straight back. You rest until then."

Harvey was moving to stand up. She put her hands on his shoulders and pressed him a little forcefully back down to sitting.

He tried to resist, but it was plain that his body wouldn't do what he told it to, and in the end he plopped back down. Kieli squatted in front of him and drew the braid of golden hair and the copper-colored stone that had come apart out of her skirt pocket.

She pressed them into Harvey's hands and said, "Listen, I want you to fix the lucky charm Beatrix gave me. And while you're doing that, I'll get some water. Okay?"

Kieli knew she was pretty much trying to railroad him into this. She waited on pins and needles for his response.

"...Okay," Harvey agreed. Although he was frowning, that was still a lot easier than she'd anticipated. She could laugh with relief.

"Okay, I'll be right back. Hang on to the Corporal, too."

Kieli took the radio from around her neck and handed it to him as she left the storeroom. She looked left and right down the colonnade outside to make sure there were no failures wandering around and then gave Harvey a little wave as she shut the heavy door of the storeroom and left him behind.

She began making her way through the silent colonnade alone, careful not to walk too loudly.

I'm sorry Harvey, Corporal... In her heart, she gave them a bow and an apology.

Kieli thought *she* might be able to touch that man's heart, just like she'd been able to touch Harvey's inner world. If they could talk inside his heart, then maybe she could bring his heart back. That way they could avoid a situation in which Harvey would have to settle the score with Jude, the old friend he cared about a lot. She didn't want Harvey to do something like that, not if there was any way around it. Because he was the kind of person who always got hurt himself whenever he hurt someone else.

And...Kieli also wanted to ask that man who must've known her mother so well a few questions.

*Had my mother forgiven my father?
Is it okay if...I forgive my father...?*

He lifted the little stone and the unraveling braid of golden strands to eye level with his left hand.

"...How does she expect me to fix this thing one-handed?" he

muttered to himself, eyes narrowed, and stuck it in his pocket.

Leaning back on one of the paintings propped against the wall, he looked over to where Beatrix's body was lying just beyond his field of vision. Resting in front of a big, finely detailed religious painting like that, she might as well be part of a painting of a beautiful angel herself.

Fzzsh...bzzzzzzzz...

The radio prodded him with a stream of faint static. He murmured back without moving his gaze from the angel in the painting, "I know, Corporal. Does that girl think she can fool my instincts?"

Sheesh, how many years does she think I've known her? Using that obvious excuse to go running off alone—it was plain as day what she was thinking. "Stupid idiot. You don't get to take my last job away..." he grumbled, standing up. His body hurt all over and he was a little unsteady, but he got to his feet by bracing himself against the painting with his hand.

He took one last glance at the body still so soft even in death that if he didn't know better he might believe she was only sleeping, and then he let his eyes fall shut and said his farewell. "Sorry, Bea. This is good-bye."



"He" ate a giant energy source and took it into himself. His body grew even bigger. But his mind didn't grow at all: If anything, his consciousness only spread out even thinner, and "he" didn't get any closer to the answer "he" sought. "He" looked around for more energy, but "he" couldn't sense any energy bigger than himself anymore.

His enlarged body was too heavy for him to walk now. With each step "he" took, all the things he'd fused with wailed and moaned in pain. The cables sticking to his body got yanked whenever they caught against something. Each time "he" felt a pain as though he was being ripped apart. With each step dead flesh came loose from his body and *plop, plopped* down in rotting clumps. "He" kept right on going, though, searching for his next source of energy. To maintain this giant body, "he" thought, would take an even larger energy source.

Why do I need to get bigger, though? A thought suddenly struck him: What had “he” been looking for?

Yes: I wanted to remember. Remember who I am, why I exist.

What was that scrap of memory that burst in me?

Who was that boy?

Whose voice was it calling me then?

That’s right...I have to make amends to that boy. That’s why I still exist. Am I still not powerful enough to beg that boy for forgiveness? How big do I have to get before I’m strong enough?

His entire bloated body hurt like hell. But, “he” thought, he still had to get bigger to make amends for his sins. Much, much bigger.

Unable to understand that the act of doing so would increase his sins, “he” kept on walking.



The colonnade was a mess of half-eaten failure corpses. Kieli carefully avoided touching them as she walked, feeling sick. They did make it easy to trace the path that “he” had taken, though. All the lights had gone out a little while ago, so the colonnade was dim, but the clouds had thinned enough to let in just a little moonlight. The horrible corpses were even more sickening in its bluish glow. Suppressing her nausea, Kieli nervously made her way down the path “he” had traveled.

Eventually she found herself in a claustrophobic passageway where pipes of all sizes twisted and turned along the walls so thickly that she couldn’t see through them to the stone. Maybe she was near the energy tower now.

Was it really okay for her to have come alone? Had she been reckless? She already regretted it, but she forced the thoughts out of her mind.

Slither...

Kieli felt something warm and clammy grab her ankle.

Too stunned to jump back right away, she turned her neck with stiff, jerky movements to look down. The half-eaten failure with its hand around her ankle lifted its head up to look at her almost pleadingly. Its body was half-eaten, was nothing more than a horrible lump of meat now. She could see a tiny shard of its core still buried in its flesh. Coal-tar-like blood sluggishly tried to

regenerate it, but it was decomposing too fast. Pieces of its body rotted off as she watched. It was such a grotesque and pitiful sight that Kieli thought it might've been better off not surviving in this in-between state at all.

Unable to do anything else, Kieli desperately yanked her foot free and ran away. Should she have taken out that last fragment and put it out of its misery? But she was too scared even for that. As she ran, she was seized by a terrible vision of every single corpse around her starting to move, reaching their hands out to her for help.

Their painful gurgles of grief wouldn't get out of her head. Forcibly banishing them from her thoughts, Kieli ran.

In her peripheral vision, she caught sight of a giant shape lurching heavily in the shadow of the pipes. She slowed her steps, startled, and peered down the passageway.

There he is...!

"He" appeared from out of the shadows of the pipes, bloated so much bigger than the first time she'd seen him that there was almost no comparison. And he had changed in other ways, too: he was so much more monster than man now that she could barely recognize him as a person-shape that walked on two legs.

Even as Kieli unthinkingly took a step back, she mentally shook herself. *No, you're the one who came looking for him, so you could talk! So try saying something to him!*

"U-um..."

The monster tilted its head and gurgled questioningly. That got Kieli's hopes up. He'd reacted as if he could hear her, so maybe he could understand her—

Owooonn...! With a bellow, the monster launched its body of carrion and scrap metal at her. Kieli instinctively jumped aside, and the monster's fist hit the pipes on the wall behind her. A few of them crushed out of shape and spat white steam.

She'd messed up. She shouldn't have dodged.

Next time you can't dodge, she instructed herself, gulping. To do *that*, she had to lose consciousness, so of course she'd come here prepared to take at least one hit. Kieli stood still and gazed at the monster head-on while it prepared for its next attack, waiting for *that girl* to appear.

She was pretty sure that the ghost girl who'd drawn out her spirit body for her when she'd gone to sleep next to Harvey would

show up again here. It was a gamble, but she felt strangely certain about it. And then she should be able to touch that man's world, just like she'd been able to touch Harvey's inner world. She should be able to touch his world.

No, you can't touch his world...

She finally heard the voice of the girl she'd been waiting for. Kieli couldn't see her, but she sensed she was nearby. Still steadily watching the monster's movements, Kieli asked in her mind,

Why not?

His mind isn't just his anymore. It's a bunch of different consciousnesses mixed together. It'd be tough to separate out just his own consciousness and touch only that.

What should I do, then?

You can't do anything...All you can do is end his life for him. He can't ever go back to what he used to be.

But—isn't there some way? Can't I talk to him somehow?

I'm sorry, but no...

As the girl's presence faded away with those despairing words, the monster charged again. Kieli gazed at it head-on as it attacked, unable to completely give up hope. *Is it really too late to talk to you...?*

Just as the monster's hand was about to connect with her face, she suddenly felt herself floating up into the air. The monster's swipe missed her and slammed into the pipes again. Kieli witnessed this as her body flew in an easy arc through the air and then got deposited back down again a little ways away.

She looked up with her mouth hanging open.

"You idiot!" an angry voice shouted at her without preamble.

Harvey looked seriously pissed. Still bewildered, Kieli asked, "Wh-what are you doing here...?"

"What's wrong with you?! You're the most reckless..." Harvey trailed off and just opened and closed his mouth a few times as though he couldn't even find the words to keep yelling at her. He was really, truly angry. Kieli knew full well that when Harvey stopped talking, it meant he was really angry.

The monster yanked its hand out from where it'd gotten stuck between two pipes and slowly turned to face them again. "I'm chewing you out later, believe me," Harvey told her, which sounded like a message from the radio around his neck, and then he raised the saber in his left hand and turned from Kieli to the monster.

"I'm sorry for you, Jude...All messed up like that, long dead but you still can't really die..."

Owooo...nn...!

The monster gave a howl that sounded distinctly like a sob. To Kieli, it seemed as if Harvey was crying as they faced off, too. Crying on the inside.

"Come here. I'll end this for you."

The monster charged with thundering footsteps that shook the ground. Holding his saber low, Harvey stared straight at his opponent and didn't move.

In the next second, it looked to Kieli as though their bodies collided and sort of mingled together. The tip of Harvey's saber was thrust into the center of Jude's body, but at the same time Jude's arm had pierced straight through Harvey's side and out his back again. Kieli let out a hoarse scream.



With his arm still stuck in Harvey's abdomen, Jude dragged Harvey in and tried to absorb him into his body. Half of Harvey's body buried itself in Jude's flesh.

"Harvey!" Kieli's scream echoed in the air.

That was when the change came.

Kieli heard a *snap* as something cracked. A beat later, the amber light in the center of Jude's body burst like a firework for an instant. Decay rapidly spread out from it in all directions like the spokes of a wheel, and the carrion of the failures he'd absorbed started to peel away from his body.

I always wanted to ask you.

Did I manage not to go off course? I didn't care who you used to be. Whoever you might have been before, you were our commanding officer, and you were the person to show me my first path forward, and thanks to you I managed not to stray from that first path. So I don't want you to add any more crimes to your list. I don't want you to suffer. I'm making this my responsibility, and I'll put you out of your misery.

He plunged the saber in with all his might, and the tip pierced directly through the center of Jude's core. Through the amber-pulsing stone heart that was like a misshapen hunk of lava now after fusing together the energies of so many of their kind. At the same time, his opponent's arm jabbed into his side and straight through him until it came out the back.

As Harvey's body was sucked halfway into Jude's flesh, saber and all, he raised his face and looked up into Jude's eyes.

"Why did you..."

Blood frothed up in his throat.

"...miss on purpose...?"

The other man could've gotten Harvey in the heart. Harvey'd been prepared for that when he closed in. And yet his opponent had stabbed him just slightly off target. He'd assumed the self-awareness it would take for Jude to do that had long since vanished without a trace.

Sand-colored eyes buried in a mass of flesh looked sadly down at him.

Images burst to life in his consciousness.

Men in simple prison uniforms, digging a mine at the rock fault. A man with hair the color of sand among them. Day after day, long, indifferent hours of digging. Superintendents yelling angrily at prisoners pushing a trolley full of fossil resources. The sandy-haired prisoner expressionlessly digging on.

War eventually breaking out. On the battlefield, equally long, indifferent hours of combat just like an extension of the digging. A bomber plane disappearing across the sky, and in its wake a city turned to ash. Corpses of innocent civilians littering the ground. A sandy-haired soldier gazing expressionlessly at them. Corpses of little children on the ground of a scorched schoolyard. Boys piling up stone graves. A sandy-haired soldier watching this equally expressionlessly.

And then, years later, meeting his brash new subordinates: a redhead and a man with slate-gray eyes. That day, the sandy-haired man felt anguish for the first time. He realized how many sins he'd indifferently committed over the centuries, how many lives he'd taken. And then came the long years of a suffering so awful it tore his heart apart in his chest. All those feelings flowed into Harvey.

"I see..." Harvey let out a sigh of breath and blood. Coughing, he pressed his forehead against his opponent's chest as if voluntarily letting himself be sucked in and muttered, "You've been hurting for a long time, haven't you...? I'm sorry I got here so late. I'll end it for you now." He groped for words. "...It's enough. You've suffered enough. Let's end this. I'll do this last thing for you. I'm willing to go with you. Jude..."

Sorry, Kieli...

I know I promised, but I might not be able to go home with you after all.

Harvey shoved the saber in hard. Just the way his commanding officer had trained him to fight. It was the best fighting style for him, since he didn't have much power or stamina. He was taught how to go after the vital points with precision, not using any unnecessary strength or unnecessary motion. How to use guns and sabers, the most effective ways to kill, how to think. The guilt that had always lurked deep in his superior's heart, and even his sense of mercy. After he'd died and become empty, his superior had poured all of that into him. *It's only natural that we're alike. Because I'm pretty much a copy of you.*

The giant, irregularly beating fused core cracked. An instant

later amber light burst like a firework, and a weird pressure punched through him.

In that moment—

Bang!

A shock wave burst from the speaker of the radio hanging around his neck, and the recoil shot Harvey out of the flesh that had sucked him in.

“Corpo—”

Did he save me? Sitting on his backside, Harvey looked down at the radio. For a little while he was just stunned, but then he came back to himself with a start. The Corporal was so beat-up he couldn't even talk anymore; there was no way he should be able to fire a shock wave like that. Black smoke rose from the speaker, which had clearly discharged more power than it could handle.

Aaaa...Owooonn...

While Harvey's attention was focused on the radio, Jude let out a sorrowful howl and began to withdraw. “Jude!” He tried to stand up, but his body was having none of it. He sank weakly back down to the floor and couldn't move any further. As Jude trudged heavily away, the carrion of the failures he'd fused with and the bits of junk he'd absorbed rotted off and the pipes crawling the walls around him shriveled at high speed and began to rust over.

The same fossil fuel decay phenomenon he'd seen at the radio tower in the ravine—

That's right. Jude had never told him how long he'd been alive or when he'd become an Undying. Those scenes that had burst to life in his mind for an instant—they were of prisoners working the first mines in the pioneering era. The man had already been alive back then. Jude's “core” had to be a very old one. It wasn't made from wartime fossil fuels; it was made from the pre-War ones that caused the decay phenomenon.

The large form that had degenerated into that deformed monster receded from his field of vision. That man had lived all alone for all the hundreds of years since the pioneering era, unable to die, and now he was trying to take everything on himself and leave just as much alone.

“What the hell? Why are you leaving me behind...?!”

Harvey was still crashed out on the floor, and his pleading voice sounded so thin and hoarse that he felt ashamed of himself. Joachim and Beatrix were both dead, and now even Jude was

leaving him behind to survive the fight all alone, again...

What the hell...I'm totally pathetic now!

And even though he'd prepared himself to die with Jude, it turned out that he still hadn't been able to stop picturing Kieli, all the way to the end.

Kieli...?!

Harvey came back to his senses with a jolt.

He lifted his face and looked around him. Kieli should have been right nearby, but he didn't see her anywhere.

"Kieli!"



So his name was "Jude." "He" remembered that it was a name "he" had given himself. It was the abominable name of the traitor who, according to the holy book, had sold the Messiah to people of a different religion back in the days of the mother planet. And he had inflicted that name on himself. Now he remembered that. Jude. That was his name.

The redheaded boy had forgiven him. Told him it was okay to end this. With those words from the boy, "he" finally had permission to die. He finally had permission to end the atonement he'd eternally sentenced himself to.

So, "he" thought, he had to go someplace far away. Someplace far, far away where he could die without involving the boy.

Slowly, "he" kept walking. One step and then another. With each step, his cracked and misshapen fused core pulsed ominously and leaked amber light that sent rot eating into his flesh. Parts of his body shriveled up into clumps of dry meat and rusted scrap metal that came loose and fell. "He" left a meandering reddish trail of rust and decay behind him as he walked, as though decades had passed by along with him. "He" groped his way through a world as vast and dark as a valley floor no light ever reached.

Then his mind registered one small, faint light near the edge of this world shut up in darkness.

His consciousness was drawn to that light. The thing giving off the pale, soft light was a small, skinny creature. As "he" was now, he could probably crush it with his fingers. It was too small to replace the flesh that had fallen off, but it could probably satisfy his

hunger for at least a little while.

Without his conscious thought, his hand stretched out to kill the tiny light. “He” was unwittingly about to add to his crimes again.

But instead his outstretched hand stopped short in front of the light.

There was something about this creature’s pale light...vague nostalgia washed over him.

“Setsu...ri...”

The thick-voiced word escaped spontaneously from his mouth buried in flesh.

The tiny light smiled a little bashfully.

“My name is Kieli. Is it okay if I walk with you for a little bit...?” the light said, and hesitantly reached out a hand to him. “He” took it, carefully, gently. It was a small, white hand. “He” was sure the faint being’s hand would break so easily if he used even the tiniest bit of force the way he was now, so he was tentative when he gripped it.

Kieli...Kieli...

He repeated the word over and over in his heart, trying to recall what it meant.

“Kieli”...Now he remembered. That was the name of the tiny life who’d smiled at him long ago. The name of the pale little light who’d greeted him with an innocent smile that forgave him everything even when “he” was tortured by his sense of sin. When that mother and daughter had appeared before him and accepted him for what he was, “he” had thought about whether making them happy would serve as an atonement. In the end, though, he hadn’t even gotten to do that. All he’d managed to do was drag them into his own problems. “He” had added to his list of crimes just by involving himself with them.

The girl with the faint light smiled and squeezed back at his hand. In her face “he” saw that little baby’s innocent smile. Ah...the young, frail life that had smiled at him back then had grown up so much. His heart was full with feeling. She’d grown up into a woman just like her mother, with a light you never lost sight of, no matter how pale and soft it was.

Tears welled up in his eyes that saw only a world of nebulous shapes now.

A wail escaped his mouth.

He felt it: This was the moment he was released from all the

guilt that had tormented him.

An enormous, thick palm enveloped Kieli's hand. It was a vaguely nostalgic feeling. Somehow she sensed that this was the same hand that the big man with the short, sandy hair and stubble had held her with when she was a baby.

Kieli was walking hand in hand with this quiet man through a closed-up corridor surrounded by pipes just like they'd once walked together through the corridors of that ship, back when she was very young. With each step he took, everything around him but Kieli decayed as if the proper flow of time had finally caught up with it. As if he was returning this city of God built on a graveyard to its rightful form.

His hand was big and very strong, and it was also a little hesitant. Kieli softly gripped it back. As they walked, she began to speak to him.

"There were lots and lots and lots of things I wanted to talk to you about. My mom, and you, and Harvey—Oh, 'Harvey' is Ephraim. He's been looking for you for a long time."

He didn't speak. Kieli didn't know whether her voice was reaching him or not, but she kept up her own one-sided conversation.

Harvey was sure to get mad at her again for doing this. But...

Never turn your eyes away. Beatrix's words came back to her. It wasn't hard to take them as Beatrix's last wish before she was assimilated into him.

I know, Beatrix. I haven't settled my own problems yet. I have to ask him everything I want to know, without looking away. Otherwise I still won't be able to forgive my father, or the people here, or this man who killed you...Or myself, either, for being rejected by my father and ruining my mother's life. I might have to keep on hating forever. I'm not a good person like Harvey, and I'm not open like him, so I can't accept everything and forgive it all yet...

"I don't know if you know this or not, but Mom died on that boat. But I got rescued, and Grandma raised me in Easterbury...She was pretty strict sometimes, but she was a really nice person. Then Grandma died, and I went to a boarding school in Easterbury, and after that I met Harvey...Ephraim. And there's also a person called the Corporal who lives in a radio, and right now, the three of us are

traveling together. You and your friends have given me lots of happiness. I think I was a happy girl. I think I still am.”

She was remembering all kinds of things, and before she knew it, somehow she was telling him her life story. Kieli didn't know if the man walking next to her was interested in this kind of thing, or if he was even listening in the first place, but she let her words flow naturally without worrying about it.

Lots of things had protected her, every minute. The feeling of her grandmother's hand, the feeling of Harvey's hand, the feeling of Beatrix's hand, and then the feeling of her father's hand...And the man next to her right now. She'd held hands with lots of people like this in her life. She'd always had someone protecting her. *I was lucky, and happy—*

“So...um...”

When she talked about her memories the words just poured from her lips, but when it came to the one thing she wanted to ask most, she hesitated and didn't finish her sentences.

I was happy. But...What about my mother? Kieli's mother had been shunned by her father and avoided by the people around her for having a daughter with weird powers; she'd been assured security for life, and then her daughter had wrecked that life for good.

She lowered her gaze, steeled herself, and asked.

“Was my mother...was my mother happy?”

One step. Two steps. Three steps.

They walked wordlessly side by side. Fragments of dead flesh peeled away from the surface of his body and fell, and with each of his steps the scenery around them decayed.

There was no answer from the man next to her.

Could she really not touch his heart after all...?

Just as Kieli lost hope, it happened.

Images poured into her mind's eye like flashes of light through the hand in hers.

She could see a black-haired woman bouncing a baby. She recognized that place: the bar on the parish border. She could see its familiar counter with glasses and bottles with old labels lined up on top.

Large male hands lifted the baby out of the mother's arms. Their owner cradled the baby in his own brawny arms as gently and carefully as he would a doll made of spun glass. The baby seemed

to feel secure wrapped in the large man's arms and began to nod off. The woman peered into the baby's face and tenderly combed through its hair with her pale fingers.

Kieli could feel her heart, her wish.

Please make this girl happy. Please, let every happiness in this world wrap around her and keep her safe.

Kieli could feel just how much she loved her baby.

I love you...

She whispered the words and softly kissed the baby's cheek.

And maybe it was just Kieli's imagination—but she thought she saw the woman lift her gaze for just a second and look right at Kieli with a smile in the striking dark eyes so much like her own.

I love you, Kieli.

I'm so glad you were born—

The image faded out.

When Kieli came back to herself, tears were rolling down her cheeks.

She looked up at the man standing next to her. The man from that day was looking down at her through the sand-colored eyes buried in the flesh of the ugly, twisted creature he'd become. Eyes the same sandy color as the sky that spread over this whole planet, that made her think of his big hands indulgently cradling the whole planet. Those eyes hadn't changed since Kieli was small.

With tears in her own eyes, Kieli smiled at him.

"Thank you so much..." she rasped with a teary smile. "Mom... had already forgiven everything, hadn't she..."

She couldn't make out the expression on the ruined mass of flesh his face had become, but she had the feeling that he smiled and gave her a little nod. And then he let go of Kieli's hand, instructed her wordlessly to stay in place, and walked slowly and heavily on.

Ahead of him was a circular cloister around a cylindrical space

that went down and down. In its center, a giant furnace rose from the depths below all the way up to the high ceiling above, clanging away as it burned fossil fuel to make power. Amber light pulsed erratically in the center of his body as though it was resonating with the sound of the generator, and in response the carrion of the failures stuck to his body peeled off even more violently and fell in giant globs that decayed the floor and walls and everything around him to rust-red.

A bridge led to the power reactor in the middle of the cloister. Kieli watched as he crossed it with obvious effort, dragging one foot in front of the other as though the reactor was magnetically repelling him. The closer he got, the brighter and stronger the amber light seeping from his body grew, and thin beams like searchlights started leaking out in all directions.

He was gradually swallowed up by the light pouring out of him, until it was hard to see him at all. And then he disappeared into the heart of the brightly burning furnace.

Crackle—

The light burst even brighter. Kieli threw one arm over her face to cover it, unable to look directly at the blindingly fierce light. The hot blast whipped her skirt and hair about wildly.

Before the flames could reach all the way to her, she saw the corridor they covered rapidly turn to rust and begin to rot away, an ancient tree stretching out its petrified roots in all directions as the flames burned the life right out of everything.

This way. Hurry!

The girl's voice echoed in the back of her mind. Shielding her face from the blast and the dazzling light, Kieli took off after it. The girl in the white slip was calling her from down the passageway. Kieli broke into a run as the walls and ceiling crumbled away in the tide of decay, nervous all the while of the power reactor behind her.

She'd almost reached the girl—

With a roar, the cracked ceiling came crashing down on her head.

He felt the wave of a powerful magnetic field spreading out like a ripple on a lake as it surged toward him.

Harvey peered ahead of him as he made his way after Kieli by clinging to the pipes that crawled along the wall. He could see the snakelike pipes on the walls and ceiling beginning to warp and rust at high speed as the wave swept by them. Something stung his skin. A flap of it tore free from his cheek and blew away as if carried on a razor-sharp wind.

The wave of decay. If *that* got to him, there was no way he'd survive—

A face fuzzy with dark green static stretched up from the radio's speaker to shield him, firing off a shock wave. "Corporal, cut it out!" He cradled the radio with his arm to protect it instead.

The shock wave and the staticky face dissolved in the air, and the warped speaker spit protesting noise. *Kshht, gnn-zik! Gnn-crrrr!*

"Shut up. You've already saved my ass plenty today," Harvey hissed quickly in retort. Meanwhile, the wave of decay closed in on them. The radio blasted a shock wave from underneath his arm.

The blade of air collided with the invisible shock surging toward them with a *wham*, bursting and scattering.

"Corporal!"

That familiar invisible impact hit him, the one that was like crashing into a different, high-pressured dimension. An intense feeling of "off-ness" tore into the left side of his body, and what little sight he still had in his left eye was abruptly gone.

That was when it happened.

A black-haired girl wrapped in pale white light materialized in front of him with her arms spread wide. The decay phenomenon split in two around her and shot past him.

The girl vanished in the same instant.



A monster latched its gaping jaws around the blade of his inexpertly wielded saber. As it pushed him over, Julius desperately used the saber as a shield to take the blow and keep its teeth from reaching him. Abnormally overdeveloped canines ground down, doing their best to crush the blade. Now the monster was straddling him. Thick saliva dripped down from the corner of its half-open

mouth onto Julius's cheek. Sharp claws bit into his shoulders where it pinned him down.

Julius clenched his teeth and kicked the monster in the stomach with every ounce of his strength, knocking it off him. The blade of his saber snapped into pieces in the same moment. In the darkness broken here and there by the glow of their torches, he could hear a constant endless clamor of gunshots and clashing weapons, along with shouts and screams from the soldiers around him fighting just as hard as he was. Even Julius, who wasn't technically part of the military force, had been forced to take up a weapon, and his priest's clothes were thickly covered with coal-tar-like blood at this point. It made them heavy and sticky.

A new monster appeared in front of him, illuminated by the flickering orange firelight. Its lidless eyes bulged and rolled around in its head until they fixed on him for a target, and then it immediately shot out its limbs like released springs and launched itself at him.

"Shit!"

Julius shoved his broken saber into the monster's mouth out of desperation. The hilt and his own hand around it plunged all the way to the wrist into his enemy's throat. Even then, the monster worked its creaking jaws, trying to tear off the arm piercing it. Julius tried to pull his arm free, but those canines bit deep into his arm and fixed it in place.

He had so many little wounds dotting his body that he couldn't really tell where he hurt anymore. It occurred to him to wonder if this was what they meant when they said Undyings didn't feel pain.

His consciousness rapidly dimming, he even mused that if this thing tore off his arm, he'd look just like *him*. *That might look kind of cool...*

That was when the jaws about to rip his arm out of its socket abruptly went slack.

The monster he was fighting had stopped moving.

"...?"

As Julius frowned, puzzled, the decay of the already half-rotted monster's body accelerated wildly in front of his eyes. Its skin and muscle almost seemed to evaporate away. Its suddenly brittle fangs broke off at the root, leaving the remains of the teeth embedded in Julius's right arm as its mummified body crumpled to the ground at his feet.

Julius stood there staring down at the corpse and panting raggedly for a while before it even occurred to him to lower his suddenly irrelevant saber. The thing's dried-up limbs were bent in unnatural directions on the ground. Julius's arms finally went limp, and he dropped the blade as he looked around blankly. The monsters the other soldiers had been fighting were drying up the same way, turning to mummies and crumbling away one after another and leaving the men standing there looking baffled, wielding weapons that all of a sudden had nowhere to go. It was a scene straight out of a book where the cursed army of zombies just withered into dust when its leader was defeated and the curse was broken.

The sights around them were changing in sync with the crumbling monsters, too. As if the air itself were swiftly decaying, the buildings aged before their eyes and grew riddled with fine cracks and swaths of moss. The corpses of the monsters were swept into the phenomenon until they seemed to form the roots of a colossal petrified tree. Julius and the soldiers were surrounded by the monster-roots, stuck between them as they covered the whole area like meshwork. All they could do was gape.

Just a short time ago the air had been full of men's shouts and clanging weapons, and now it was quiet enough to make them suddenly feel pointless.

Still dazed, Julius nonetheless got to his feet, grabbing on to a root for support, and surveyed the situation around him.

"Is everybody all right? Get me a count of the injured," he ordered in his father's place, and with a rustle the soldiers gradually stirred back into motion. Voices from all directions began reporting: "I've got two injured here." "There's one here, but he's pinned and we can't get him out."

"Is Lord Sigri—" Remembering a very important fact, Julius turned toward the room they'd set up for their infirmary. The desiccated corpse-roots wove so thickly together around the building that he couldn't even see through them to the right passageway. He tried to pick his way through, but when he got reckless and started breaking them he sent the decrepit walls and ceiling crumbling even faster.

"Julius, sir, it's too dangerous."

"But Lord Sigri is in there..."

Father Sigri was resting in an upstairs room. Julius's father had

told him to take care of Sigri, which meant Julius had to protect him no matter what, and yet at this rate he couldn't even go check on the man. Julius gritted his teeth, balling his hands into fists.

It was as though the capital had aged decades—centuries—and crumbled into decay in the blink of an eye. What the hell was happening?

Juli...

He heard a faint voice. It sounded as if it was whispering right into his ear, and at the same time so thin and faraway it could vanish any second. He turned in the direction he thought it'd come from, but all he saw were grim-faced soldiers milling around.

Juli...

There it was again. A girl's voice with a strange echo to it that seemed to be speaking directly to his mind.

Juli. There were only two people Julius knew of who called him that: his mother and a certain girl. And only one of those two was still alive.

"Kieli...?"

That man...I mean, Father Sigri, is safe. It's okay...

He looked all around him, but her voice came from some mysterious place that seemed to get farther away the more he searched for her. It was unmistakably her voice, though.

Juli, there are some people trapped in the cathedral building who can't get out. I'm going to tell you how to get to them, so listen close, okay?

"Huh? O-okay. I will."

The girl's voice was coming from thin air, but Julius cupped his ear and listened intently all the same. The soldiers around him frowned warily as he stood all alone apparently agreeing with nothing. The girl's voice told him a clear route that would take him to the back of the cathedral. Evidently this phenomenon that had left them in a tangle of what looked like the petrified roots of a

giant tree had spread all over headquarters, and the place was a maze now.

Okay, I'll leave it to you...Be careful...

The girl's voice began to fade out, and Julius hastily cried out to his invisible conversation partner.

"Kieli! Kieli, where are you right now?"

I'm okay...

Right before the voice disappeared, he thought he saw a girl appear in front of him. A black-haired girl wrapped in pale, vague light. She and the light dwindled away into nothingness with a parting smile just like the one the Holy Mother wore in paintings.

"Sir?" one of the soldiers asked warily after Julius had stood there blankly gazing into space for a few moments.

He schooled his expression. "Never mind, it's nothing. Wait here until my father comes back. I'd like just one team to come with me, though. There are civilians trapped in the cathedral." He swept his eyes over the soldiers' lost faces as they listened to his orders. "Is there anyone who'll come with me? I need your help. Please," he asked earnestly, and then waited for a response. Things were already so chaotic. If even Julius himself didn't understand it, he couldn't help doubting that anybody else would want to volunteer for a cryptic request like this that added to the confusion even more.

But then—

"I'll come with you, sir," volunteered a soldier, stepping forward. And as if that had been the signal, a whole chorus of them came forward clamoring, "Sir, I'll join you!" Julius faltered briefly—so many of them had volunteered that he thought there were actually a few too many—but after a moment, he simply said, "Thank you. I appreciate it," and bowed his head gratefully.



What in the world had just happened? All of them sat frozen in dumb surprise for a while, unable to take any of it in. The fossil fuel

pipes crawling along the walls of the supply room shriveled into desiccated vines and rusted over; the walls and ceiling were weathering before their eyes, cracking and sprouting moss.

The whole area went dead silent. There was only the occasional sound of plaster falling off the now-ancient walls.

It's safe to go outside...

A voice suddenly echoed in Yoshiu's ear.

Help will be here soon. It's safe to go outside...

It was a girl's voice, one that seemed about to fade away any moment, and yet at the same time authoritative and reassuring. He looked around him, but he saw only young children and elderly. There was no girl who could be the owner of that voice.

No less bewildered than before, but unthinkingly drawn to the voice, Yoshiu stood up. One by one, the others got up, too. The barricade they'd built of church pews had rusted into a solid mass, too, but the men worked together to break it down until they managed to make a space just wide enough for a grown man to pass through. Then, one after another, they climbed anxiously out into the hallway.

The moment Yoshiu left the supply room, he was seized by the illusion that he'd been suddenly catapulted several centuries into the future. Enormous tree roots and blankets of moss covered the walls and ceiling of the hallway outside, filling the passage so completely in both directions that they wouldn't be able to get anywhere unless they cut their way through.

"Hellooooo! Is anyone there?" someone shouted. It started out hesitantly at first, but soon more and more people were crying "Hello! Hello!" to anyone who might be on the other side of the great tree roots blanketing their vision. Those who had knives took the lead and hacked at the roots, and the twenty-odd men, women, and children who'd been holed up in the supply room took one another's hands and began their escape. Yoshiu helped the women

and the elderly make their way down from the hole in the barricade. The man who'd been bitten by a monster outside the barricade made it out with help from someone else, too.

People who'd chosen their own safety over someone else's just a few short hours ago, who'd turned away from the reality in front of them and said "We've got no choice," were taking one another by the hand, supporting and encouraging one another as they began to make their way out. It was as though the evil spirits possessing them had released their hold. They climbed their way over and shoved their way through the great tree roots that spread like meshwork over the whole corridor. The able-bodied helped the injured, the women, the children, and the elderly, periodically calling for help to anybody who might be listening as everyone there worked together to move forward.

"...?"

For some reason he found his attention drawn to one side of the passageway. *What was that?* Entrusting the old woman he'd been supporting to the nearest person, Yoshiu left the tide of people and pushed through the roots as though something were leading him along.

Though the roots covered his entire field of vision, he made his way over and under and through them until he found a little room on the side of the passage sealed with a heavy door. The door was awfully rusted, but when he gave it a push the hinges snapped easily. It collapsed with a thud, sending up a cloud of dust inside.

When the dust settled, the thick, old smell of oil paints hit his nose.

It was a storeroom for paintings. The dim little room was completely carpeted in rust and moss just like the passageway, and most of the valuable paintings propped against the walls were moldering away, but there were still several left that retained their basic shape.

"Ah...ahh..."

Yoshiu whimpered at the sight before his eyes.

He crumpled to his knees on the spot.

Lying in front of him, fused forever into one of the tree roots, was *her*.

Her face so calm at rest, like a maiden who'd fallen asleep in the woods, and her short, gently waving golden hair were both a part of the root now, too—she was like an exquisite engraving

carved into the tree, far more beautiful than any of the valuable paintings around her. She was an angel carved by a master artist.

Fat tears poured down his cheeks and onto his knees.

Ah, Yoshiu wondered, *how many years has it been since the last time I cried?*

This was his angel in her death: utterly crushing and utterly beautiful. This was his angel, preserved unchanging for all eternity as though the will of someone like a god had worked to ensure that her beauty would never be lost.

“...Hello! Is anybody there? If you’re there, answer me...”

He began to hear voices calling somewhere far away.

“Over here! Help us!”

Answering voices. Clanking armor-plated footsteps approached, along with a hum of male voices. Maybe help had come for them.

Almost all of the worshippers who’d fled into the bowels of the cathedral were safely rescued from the strange enchanted maze that day within only a handful of hours. Her golden head wasn’t among them, and there were only a few, including Yoshiu, who knew that her exquisitely beautiful sculpture-like form had been secretly left deep inside the cathedral for eternity.

There were many others besides Yoshiu who would later testify that they’d heard a voice guided by the Holy Mother that day. There would even be a few to testify that they’d actually seen the Holy Mother. She was a girl with long black hair and striking dark eyes, they said, glowing white and wearing a mild smile.



Suspicious of the way the commotion downstairs had gone suddenly silent, Sigri braced his right shoulder and sat up in bed. He managed to make it to the doorway on slightly unsteady feet, hanging on to the wall for support. The door to his little room was completely encrusted with moss. He wrenched it open half by force.

“What in the world...?”

What looked like the roots of a giant petrified tree spread over everything outside his room. They crisscrossed one another so tightly that he couldn’t take even one step through the doorway.

Dad...

He heard a voice call him. With a start, Sigri looked around him.

This way. I'll lead you to an exit.

He glimpsed the hem of a skirt glowing with white light on the far side of the roots blocking his path. When he took a closer look, he saw a tunnel near the floor that looked just barely big enough to crawl through.

This way, the voice repeated, and Sigri, drawn to it, stooped and followed it into the tunnel enclosed by roots. When he passed through the entrance, a narrow arched path hollowed out from the tree stretched in front of him. He saw a girl wreathed in light disappear down it.

"W-wait...!"

Protecting his right shoulder as best he could, he crawled down the tunnel. It was like entering into a withered plant. The path twisted left and right, and Sigri hit a fork or a dead end every so often. Whenever that happened, he'd catch a glimpse of the girl showing him which way to go. Sigri crawled single-mindedly after her like a man possessed.

After he'd been crawling for some time, a mossy and half-buried iron door blocked his way. When he looked left and right, a faint voice urged him on from the other side.

This way.

He pushed his uninjured shoulder against the door and shoved as hard as he could. Its rusted hinges came loose, and the door and Sigri both fell through to the other side.

The root-covered tunnel kept on going from here, but off in the distance ahead of him, he could see it growing a little less dark. The blue-gray night sky was beginning to lighten into a sandier tone, as though day was beginning to break.

If you keep on going straight, you'll get out. I told Julius's father, so I think help will be there for you soon.

He heard a voice somewhere speaking again. On his hands and

knees, Sigri raised his head and looked straight up above him.

A girl with such faint presence that she seemed likely to disappear any moment floated there in midair.

Sigri wasn't as surprised as he'd thought he would be. In fact, he found himself easily accepting that this girl with Setsuri's blood would have mysterious powers. Striking black eyes just like her mother's were looking down at him. In a scratchy voice, he spoke to her...to his only daughter. "You came to help me, then...?"

She looked down at him with quiet, commanding eyes and answered coldly and a little stiffly.

There are things you still have to do. You have a responsibility that comes with your status. Because you chose that status for yourself...

"You called me 'Dad' back there, didn't you?"

At Sigri's words, the girl tilted her head, looking a little lost. A bit sadly, she murmured, "*You've already punished yourself enough for your sins. You've suffered enough, just like they have...*"

And then for the first time, the girl faintly, ever so faintly, smiled for him.

But your real work is still ahead of you. You still have a big job left to do, don't you?

"...Yes. I have a feeling I'm about to be very busy."

Sigri returned the girl's smile. Bathed in twinkling light, she rose straight up through the thicket of tree roots and climbed toward the sky. Sigri stared up at the place where the light had vanished for a while after it was gone.

Setsuri, our daughter really did grow up to be just like you...

In his mind's eye, he compared the girl's face with the face of the wife he'd once truly loved, but had forsaken in the end—a sin he could never hope to be forgiven for.

"All right, time to go..."

The capital was still in chaos, and he had a big job left to do as Elder. Even if he would never be able to atone for that old sin, he would take responsibility and keep walking the path he'd chosen for himself.

Sigri fixed his eyes straight ahead and began making his way down the tunnel toward the light in front of him.



Everything around her was bathed in a soft light. Kieli's steps felt floaty, and she wasn't sure what state she was in right now exactly, but strangely, she never got lost as she walked through the light.

She walked, finding people who'd lost track of the light and cowered in corners, people who'd lost their way and come to a standstill; and she showed them the paths of the light that she could clearly see, though it was often faint. When Kieli spoke to them they were always awfully surprised at first, and they looked wary. Still, eventually they each found the light and began making their way toward it. Once she'd seen them safely off, she went to others who were lost and showed them the signs pointing to the light.

Please let me share all the happiness I've been given with everyone else today... She didn't have any lofty goals like Julius, and she wasn't softhearted like Harvey, and she wasn't strong like Beatrix, either. But Kieli was sure there must be something she could do for people, too. *Please let me become as nice a person now as I was stubborn before. Please let me become one of the people who can make someone else happy.* Kieli walked and helped people in trouble fueled on those hazy wishes alone.

And so she walked on air around the whole capital. She had the feeling she'd done a lot of walking and spoken to a lot of different people, but she wasn't tired. Her body was light, and she felt a mysterious sense of freedom.

I wonder if I'm dead, she thought vaguely.

She came to an invisible staircase hanging in the air, and she climbed it step by step high up into the sky. When she had already climbed so high that she was starting to wonder whether she'd end up walking straight into Heaven, Kieli stopped and looked down at her feet.

Capital headquarters sprawled across the landscape far below her. It was a tranquil, completely motionless landscape, like a finely detailed painting done in rust-red.

Headquarters was only a forest of great dead trees and tangled roots now. Countless trees covered in rust, so many that the radio tower she had seen in the gorge couldn't even compare.

Rust-red streaks fanned out from the looming energy tower at the center like a gigantic tree stretching its enormous roots far out in every direction. The sound of fossil-fuel boilers that had always filled the city was gone now, and at some point during the night the

cloud of thick gray smog had disappeared, too. Soundless crystal-clear air was steadily permeating the whole city. To Kieli, it looked as if that rust-red picture depicted the sunset at the end of the world. As if everything that had wreathed the city before had died away into nothingness.

A clear wind blew down over the city from the mountain range with no smog in it at all. Along the mountain range, the slate-blue night sky began to lighten into the thin, sandy color of early morning, and the rising sun's rays started to filter through the gaps between mountains.

It was as though everything that had been laid to waste was about to be born anew. It was the beginning of the world. *I'm witnessing the moment when the end of the world turns into the beginning*, Kieli thought.

That ceremony connecting the end to the beginning unfolded solemnly and silently far below Kieli's watching eyes.

Little by little, people came crawling out of the rusty root-covered Church headquarters. Some looked blankly around them, some sat down on the ground and breathed sighs of relief, and some shielded their eyes from the morning sun as though it was somehow too dazzling now. They were like infants, newly born out of the great tree.

Kieli's consciousness slowly transferred itself inside the root-covered capital. She sensed someone still trapped deep inside the tree. Her mind wound its way through a tunnel surrounded by roots.

There was a young redheaded man wandering shakily around the capital looking for something. Dragging his wrecked body along, stumbling over the roots at his feet and sometimes falling.

You have to go back.

Kieli heard a girl's voice. The ghost girl from before was floating next to her all of a sudden, though Kieli didn't know when she'd gotten there. But there she was, the girl in the white slip who kind of reminded Kieli of herself, smiling at her.

He's looking for you, you know. You still have to go back down there.

When the pale girl tugged her hand, Kieli took the invisible staircase again, back down toward the earth this time.

She caught sight of herself lying on the floor of a tunnel formed by two collapsed walls that weren't much better than heaps of rubble and rusty pipes now. The girl prodded her shoulder, urging her forward. Kieli felt a force pulling her rapidly back down to her body, but she turned to look at the girl. She was floating in the air, moving away from Kieli and up into the sky.

"You..." Kieli called to her before she left. "You were my very first invisible friend, weren't you?"

The girl's voice and faintly smiling face receded farther and farther away.

Yep, we're old friends. You were the first one to smile at me, my tiny friend...

And then the girl's voice and form were both swallowed up by a soft white light, along with everything else.

"Mn...ugh..." There were stinging pains in little places all over her body. When she cracked her eyelids open and blinked a few times, her cloudy vision gradually started to clear. She was trapped in an unlit space boxed in by pipes and rubble. Kieli sat slowly up. Fine fragments of rubble slid off her shoulders. "Ow ow ow..." Wincing and grabbing one aching shoulder, she surveyed her body. She was scratched up just about everywhere, but she didn't seem to be seriously injured.

Ga-thud.

One section of the rubble was moved away by somebody outside, and a tiny shaft of light came in.

"Kieli!"

A hoarse voice called her name. Someone's face peered in at her from a gap in the rubble, although he was backlit and she couldn't really see him. She didn't need to, though. She knew his voice right away. That low, gravelly voice that rumbled in his throat a little, in its usual sort of offhanded tone. She knew he must be looking a little bit ready to cry right now, too.

Smiling, Kieli forced her voice to unstick from her throat. "I'm home..."

She gripped his outstretched hand. The big palm and long, angular fingers that at the same time looked awfully thin and fragile: the hand she loved.



They wandered for a while through tunnels formed by the giant tree roots before they finally got out through a narrow gap in one tunnel wall, at which point they found themselves in a gloomy space where the air was stale and cold and smelled like rocks. It felt like a chasm in the mountain range. The sheer, rocky cliffs towering on either side of them cut off most of Kieli's normal field of vision. Below them lay an impenetrable darkness that must keep going all the way to the floor of the valley; when she looked up above them, all she could see were a few thin, barely there shafts of light coming from far overhead.

When they stepped out onto a tiny path formed by a ledge along one rock wall, they found a narrow, rusty track eroded almost into nothingness.

"A trolley track...?" Kieli murmured, taking in the rails stretching out in front of them.

Harvey nodded from where he'd been feeling the nearby wall with his hand, taking stock. "Probably used to be for carrying fuel to the energy tower, back a long time ago." He squatted on the ground and ran his hand along the rail to feel the rust. "It's pretty old...It might be from before the capital was built, even." The radio buzzed its agreement.

"A track from before the capital was built..." Kieli hugged the radio tightly to her chest again.

"Let's try following it. We might find a way out."

Harvey took the lead and began making his way down the path laid with rails, trailing his hand along the rock wall towering to one side of the ledge. The trolley track at their feet was definitely weather-beaten, and it broke off here and there. From what Kieli could see, it had gone a good long time without any repairs after it was abandoned.

Both of them were more than a little unsteady and beaten up.

They took each other by the hand and worked together to move forward along the path, which abruptly changed elevation here and there where the rock had cracked. The freezing-cold air at the northern end of the continent hung stationary between the walls of the gorge. It stung Kieli's skin painfully. Only Harvey's hand, holding hers whenever it was time to climb over the bumps in the ledge, occasionally gave her own hand some warmth; otherwise she was chilled to the bone.

She wondered how long they'd been walking now. It seemed as though hours had passed, but for all she knew it might have been only twenty or forty minutes. It *felt* as if they'd been walking for a long time, anyway, and her hands and feet were completely numb and exhausted. Her body was so frozen through that she was starting to lose all sensation.

Harvey, who was walking in front, abruptly stopped. Kieli's face bumped lightly into his back. When she looked over his arm to see what was going on, she saw that part of the rock ledge had crumbled away. Harvey was feeling along the edge of the drop with the sole of his shoe. Without turning around he asked her, "Kieli, can you see the other side?"

Kieli squinted across the gap in the rock ledge. "Yep."

"How far is it?"

"About two meters, I think..."

"Okay."

Harvey took a little step to get a running start and leapt over to the other side. He tottered a little, but otherwise his landing was more or less steady. Then he turned and signaled to Kieli with a wave. Kieli jumped after Harvey with everything she had, and he caught her on the other side.

"Have you gained weight again?" Harvey said teasingly as he set her down.

"What do you mean, 'again'?!"

When Kieli pouted at him, he laughed a little...an honest laugh, as if his usual expressionless mask had fallen off, and then he plopped himself down on the ground.

"Wanna take a break?"

"Uh-huh." Kieli wasn't going to disagree. She was completely worn out from all that walking.

The path of the rock ledge and its rails curved lazily ahead of them, periodically sloping up and down, but always looking pretty

much the same as far as Kieli's eye could see. No light at the end of the tunnel in sight. She wanted to go back to where she thought Julius and the others had probably escaped to and let them know that she and Harvey were okay, but they wouldn't be able to get back to the capital unless they could find a path aboveground somewhere. Even if they did get lucky and find their way out of this valley, though, who knew how far they'd be from the capital by then.

The speaker of the radio on her lap began leaking faint noise. *Kshht...bzzzzzzzz...*

"He's telling us to hang in there and walk a little farther," Kieli murmured after a moment, her mind a little fuzzy. As soon as she'd sat down, the exhaustion had hit hard...*Huh?* she thought then, surprised at herself. "It's weird...I understood what the Corporal said just now..." She'd heard his voice, too. Harvey'd said before that the reason she couldn't hear him was because she wasn't listening. It must have been because up until now she'd been so stubbornly rejecting reality, because she couldn't just open up. But she could hear him now.

Harvey could hear the Corporal's static-voice like this the whole time. Harvey'd understood. All this time he'd been saying, "*I'm still okay. I'm still here.*" All this time he'd been cheering the two of them on. "*Hang in there,*" he'd been saying. Their guardian was right there next to them, and he had been all along.

"You cold, Kieli?"

"Mm. A little."

When she hunkered down and wrapped her arms around her knees, effectively hugging the radio, Harvey patted the ground next to him and said, "C'mere." Kieli pressed up against him and they spread the long priest's robes over both of them. It was at least a little warmer this way. The air around them was painfully cold, and she caught glimpses of frosted-over moss on the rock wall. Her fingers and toes and cheeks were numb. She couldn't really feel them anymore.

It was cold, and they were both worn out and banged up all over...but this place was quiet, and it was only Kieli and Harvey and the Corporal here, and oddly enough, going back to just the three of them like this felt sort of fun. Maybe there wasn't any exit out of here at all. Kieli kind of felt as though they might be following these tracks toward the world's last terminal, but she also

felt that she was basically okay with that, so the idea didn't really bother her. A nebulous sense of well-being filled her heart. The world's last terminal might be a happy place.

She tried gently settling her head on Harvey's shoulder next to her. "It smells the same here as in that mine in Easterbury...The prisoners must have used this path a whole lot carrying their minerals, huh?"

"Yeah," he answered as he planted a cigarette between his lips. The comfortable sound of his voice washed over her. Kieli started to feel sleepy, and she let her eyes flutter closed. She was afraid she might fall asleep for real if she didn't keep talking, so she rummaged around in her mind for something to talk about.

"Do you think we'll make it back to Easterbury?"

"Sure we will," Harvey answered easily. As he searched his pocket for his lighter, he went on in the same casual tone of voice most people used to talk about what they'd eat for breakfast the next day. "First thing we'll have to do is clean up. That house is pretty rusty, right? And covered in dust. No glass in the windows, either. We'll have to do some patching up before it'll be livable. And repaint the walls, and get furniture..."

"Right, yeah. Like beds and tables and kitchen stuff," Kieli joined in. Harvey was talking about their plan so easily it felt out of place, but she just went with it. Not in spite of everything, but *because* of it. Because they might not make it home, because it might never come true, she closed her eyes and pictured a fun future. Right now she could let her imagination run wild. She could picture all kinds of fun things ahead for them.

"I'm going to set up the second-floor balcony for potted plants and grow herbs there. Then we'll earn a living selling herbs!"

"We can just make our living on cards."

"No, that's not good enough!" Kieli scowled at Harvey for being a wet blanket. What kind of dream was that?! "It's my dream to run a shop, okay? I'm going to run a shop and earn my own money. I don't care if it only trickles in and I only earn enough to get by on. I don't want to earn my money by gambling!"

"Okay, okay. You can do whatever you want," Harvey said, laughing at her passionate insistence. The radio gave a staticky laugh, too.

"We'll play rock music in the shop. Something bouncy and light would be good. Not too wild. You pick the songs, okay, Corporal?"

The Corporal will go on the counter. I'll serve the customers, and..."

As she spoke, she could actually picture it in her mind. When there weren't any customers, she'd turn up the music and hum along as she cared for all her seedlings. She could make dried flowers and artificial flowers, too. It might be fun to sell wreaths like the one Yana had made. They hadn't been in contact with the bar on the parish border since they left, but when everything was over, Kieli wanted to try writing letters to them again. She hoped the bartender and Yana were living happily together.

And as for Harvey...as for Harvey...I can't quite picture Harvey helping with the shop. Her imagination was rapidly spinning the tale of their fun future, filling it with images, but her mind started to get foggy, and her mouth couldn't quite get all the words out anymore. She had a lot more she wanted to say, but the words started getting sort of stuck.

Her head started to droop as she nodded off. She felt comfortable, the way she did rocked by the vibrations of a train. She pictured it behind her closed eyelids. Right now, they were on a train bound for that transfer station in Easterbury. The three of them together, sometimes talking and other times just staring into space, taking their last journey and thinking about the new life they'd have after they got to the station. Harvey sat in the window seat just like always, joining the conversation or not as he felt like it and planting a cigarette between his lips. He reached into his pocket and fished out not a lighter, but a chocolate bar.

A chocolate bar?

Kieli snapped back to reality and opened her eyes. Sitting next to her against the rock wall, Harvey tried to light his cigarette just the way he would with his lighter, and then he looked down at the chocolate bar in his hand and blinked.

Harvey and chocolate. Now there was the most ridiculous combination ever. Kieli couldn't help laughing. Harvey narrowed his eyes and glared down at the candy that had come out of his pocket instead of his lighter and made a bitter face as though he'd just bitten into a piece of unsweetened chocolate.

"What are you doing with that thing?"

"...Julius's nursemaid put it in there. She said something like 'Chocolate is good for tired people. It can have you feeling better in no time. So please, take it with you for medicinal purposes' and forced it on me." Harvey pouted. Then he gruffly thrust the

chocolate bar at Kieli. "Here."

Kieli decided to just accept it and be glad. She was hungry anyway, and she thought it might warm her up a little.

"Want to split it?...Oh right, you hate chocolate."

"No, I don't," Harvey answered, only half paying attention as stuck his hand back in his pocket and rifled around for the lighter he wanted.

Kieli stilled her numb hands in the act of breaking the bar in half. Immediately, Harvey's face told her he'd realized his mistake.

Kieli gave him a hard sidelong glare. "You told me you hated chocolate, didn't you?"

"Did I?" Harvey asked with badly feigned innocence, looking in the opposite direction from where Kieli sat. Kieli persisted unforgivingly. "You did, didn't you? That was what you said to weasel out of your promise again, wasn't it?"

"Y-you just won't quit..."

"I'm being perfectly fair!" She half-stood and leaned her body forward to force her way into Harvey's line of sight, but her numb feet slipped on a rail. "Eep!"

She missed her footing on the ledge and fell, smacking both her face and her knees on the rails.

"Kieli?!"

Harvey instantly turned pale and started feeling around him with his hand. Kieli grabbed his hand when he held it out near her and pulled herself up. Covering her face, which smarted from going totally numb and then getting hit, she complained in a pitiful voice, "I dropped the chocolate." The chocolate bar she'd let go of when she fell was tumbling its way down the valley below now. Still, if she hadn't been lucky it could've been her tumbling, so she'd really gotten off easy with just bumps on her face and knees.

"I can't believe you..." After a while just sitting frozen and pale-faced, Harvey heaved a drained sigh and let his shoulders drop. "Where does it hurt?"

He patted around Kieli's face with his hand. They were sitting right next to each other and facing each other, too, but it felt as though he was feeling his way hesitantly through the dark.

"Harvey..."

She caught his fingers as they brushed against her lips and looked straight into his face. Her voice shook a little. "You...can't really see much anymore, can you?"

For a little while Harvey gazed back at her expressionlessly, and then he smiled a little. His coppery right eye and dark brown left eye focused vaguely in front of her.

He drew his face close to hers and whispered in a soft, low voice, "I can see your face, Kieli."

His thin, slightly dry lips touched hers along with his whisper.

A warm puff of breath flowed into her mouth.

...And then, for what might have been only a second but felt like an eternity to Kieli, she was staring wide-eyed at Harvey's face in extreme close-up. His eyes had drifted closed. Directly below their jaws, the radio was spouting grating noise along the lines of "*What do you two think you're doing?!*", but Harvey didn't appear to care, and Kieli was too tied up in knots to even hear it.

The lips against hers drew away. Kieli stayed frozen, sitting straight as a board with her fists resting on her knees, not even breathing. Harvey's breath was still in her mouth, with the heat of his body still lingering in it. Harvey pulled his face away and said teasingly, "A replacement for the chocolate. Feeling warmer?"

And then he breezily looked away from her and began lighting his cigarette with the lighter he'd finally found in his pocket.

The radio was still squawking, "*You're taking advantage of the fact that I can't talk! You know I told you I'd never allow such unchaste behavior while I'm still around to stop it!*" in static at her feet. Kieli flicked the hem of her skirt over it without any real conscious thought. She didn't even look; she was still gazing dazedly into space. She could hear a muffled tirade of noise coming from somewhere underneath her petticoat.

A beat later, Kieli felt her temperature suddenly skyrocket. Forget "feeling warmer": she thought her face was about to burst into flames. She stayed frozen without breathing for a little longer just because it seemed like such a shame to let his breath leave her, but then her lungs started to burn, so she took a deep inhale, and then it hit her that this was Harvey's vaguely smoky breath entering her body, and her temperature shot even higher.

"I, ah, ah...Th-that's not fair! I didn't—you—you took me by surprise! I wasn't *ready!*" The words jumbled together in her head and blurted out of her mouth in spurts while she flapped her mouth open and closed like an idiot.

"Not fair"? You give me that even when I *keep* the promise?"

Harvey's cheek twitched as he took a drag of his cigarette. Kieli

pouted, miffed. “D-do it again, ri...right this time...” Her voice had faded into nothing by the end, but she looked up at Harvey through her lashes. Harvey looked at her out of the corner of his eye, too, so she flushed bright red and looked down, spine stiff. “N-n-n-never mind...” The radio was still grumbling something from inside her skirt.

A puff of warmth...and with it, priest’s robes coming into her field of vision. Harvey leaned over her and placed his left hand on the rock wall she was resting against, cigarette between his fingers, right next to her head. When Kieli lifted her face suspiciously, lips touched hers again, slowly this time.

She closed her eyes.

One second. Two seconds. Just about three seconds.

Enough for each of them to confirm the other’s touch, confirm that they both existed.

Harvey’s lips drew away. When Kieli opened her eyes, he was already facing away from her, puffing at his cigarette and staring at nothing. And then he darted a glance at her out of the corner of his eye and smiled shyly and guilelessly, almost boyishly somehow.

His breath in her lungs and the scent of his tobacco touched her heart as kindly and aching as his smile. She was happy—happier than anything—and yet her chest hurt harder than anything, too, and tears welled up in her eyes.

She was sure something that had been worrying at Harvey’s heart for a long time had just stopped. The end of his world was so kind and warm, and so heartbreaking, too.

Kieli began to hear muffled, staticky music coming from underneath her skirt. She could make out faint snatches of familiar medium-tempo rock. Was this the music they played at the end of the world...? It was the same music that had always been right there with Kieli and Harvey on their travels. She thought she might be okay with going to the end of the world, if she got to have this music with her.



"Kieli," called Harvey's voice through the music.

I get to have the radio's music and Harvey's voice with me at the end of the world. I'm so lucky. I can die happy now...

"Kieli. Hey."

When she felt Harvey shaking her shoulder, Kieli opened her eyes. She hadn't noticed her lids starting to droop. Harvey was on his feet, looking around them. "Radio waves...the Corporal's picking up radio waves..."

Surprised, Kieli flipped the hem of her skirt up and dragged the radio out from under the petticoat she'd covered it with. It was more than half static and it came in fits and starts, but yes—that was definitely the sound of stringed instruments coming from its speaker.

"Where from...?"

She squinted along the rock ledge with its trolley track. All she could see were the tall rock walls closing in the darkness on either side of them.

"Can you stand?"

"Yeah."

Harvey took her by the arm, and she hung the radio back around her neck and wrestled her stiff limbs into submission. They joined hands and started making their way along the rock ledge again, following the music. The path's slope had been gentle for a good long time now, but it grew steadily steeper as they walked. They took it one step at a time, working their legs for all they were worth.

Eventually they came to the end of the track. The crude lift there, which Kieli assumed had once carried fossil fuel up to the surface, was broken. But there was a series of protrusions in the rock leading upward, and it looked as if they could probably manage to climb with them. Harvey felt his way up by touch, climbing one foothold at a time and then lending his hand to Kieli to pull her up after him. They mustered all their remaining strength to make their way toward the top. Slowly but surely, the barely there music from the radio's warped speaker started to come through firm and clear.

The tops of the sheer cliffs finally came into view. Pale sand-colored light filtered down from the narrow scrap of sky between

the rock walls. When Kieli scrambled up to the last foothold and squirmed onto the surface, Harvey pulled her to her feet.

Her shoes touched soil.

“Whoa...”

Kieli could see her breath leaving her mouth before it disappeared right away into the clear, cold air.

The two of them stood still right there, not letting go of each other, and gazed wordlessly at the scenery spread out before them.

Beneath the lightly clouded far-northern sky, black soil stretched on and on as far as the eye could see. Crystal sparkles dotted it here and there where the frozen ground reflected back the sun’s soft rays.

It was a view beautiful enough to make her want to cry and spectacular enough to almost make her dizzy.

“I never knew there were wilds like this on top of the mountain range...” Kieli murmured, so moved it came out half-tearful. “Harvey, can you see it...?” she asked the man next to her hesitantly. Harvey’s eyes stayed fixed on the scene in front of them. He sucked in a deep breath, seeming to feel the vast tundra’s air more than he saw it, and then smiled on the exhale.

“Yeah. I can tell what it’s like...”

The radio was picking up the signal loud and clear now. When Kieli looked around her, shielding her eyes from the glare of the ice with her free hand, she made out what looked like a tall steel tower on the horizon far ahead of them. She jogged a few steps toward it and stood on her tiptoes, squinting.

Is that...a mobile radio station? Maybe it was from the same era as the one they’d come across in that northwestern canyon, because they looked a lot alike. The big mobile building with its tall steel towers was approaching them from across the tundra.

“Harvey, we’re saved!”

Kieli waved gleefully at the radio station. It kept coming closer, its wheels clattering loudly against the tundra. She waited excitedly, but it passed right by a little in front of where she and Harvey stood. “Ah—” *Maybe they didn’t notice us...?* Kieli froze on the spot with her hand still hanging in the air midwave. The radio station’s steel towers grew smaller again in the distance as it left the two of them behind, awfully tiny here in the middle of the vast tundra. The signal the radio was picking up steadily faded.

“I was so sure they’d help us...” Kieli slumped with

disappointment, letting her hand fall back to her side.

“Kieli,” Harvey murmured, tugging on her sleeve. “The sound. It’s coming back.”

Kieli looked back up. The radio’s signal gradually picked up again. She could see the steel towers that had passed them by coming in close once again.

They waited there, and before long the mobile radio station skimming along the tundra with its big wheels stacked on top of each other came to a stop a little ways away from them. A rectangular hatch in the side wall opened up, and a figure came out of the darkness through it. Kieli waited, gulping unconsciously.

“Are you stranded?”

It was a deep male voice, with a touch of a pre-War accent that reminded her of the Corporal’s. A middle-aged man in tattered winter clothes had appeared from the hatch.

“Who is it? Who is it?” called an innocent, higher-pitched voice, and then a little boy popped his head out from behind the man. He had a winter hat on. “Wow! It’s people from the world Below!” he cried excitedly, his eyes shining.

And that was how Kieli and Harvey met the tribe that lived in the far-north tundra and broadcast music on their guerrilla radio frequency.

The world hadn’t ended yet.

Beyond the world’s last terminal stretched a whole new, wide—wide enough to make you sigh, or make you cry—world they’d never known.

The journey wasn’t quite over yet.

CHAPTER 7

LIFE'S CLOSING~HEAVEN

Episode 1: Nobody Knows

Fweee!

His short whistle disappeared into the sky far above him. The bird that had been soaring lazily over the flock of quee eating their grass made one final circle overhead and then began her descent. Her pale sand-colored wings propelled her swiftly through the air until she came to one-footed rest on the arm he extended to her.

“Good girl, Pedryuvka.”

When he raised his other hand, palm up, Pedryuvka pecked with her long beak at the scraps of jerky he’d sprinkled on his glove. His gloves were warm ones, made of queeskin and stuffed with grass.

Ner and the others always said “Pedryuvka” was a funny name, but he’d thought it up himself, and he liked it. He was sure Pedryuvka liked it, too. Pretty sure, anyway.

“Ishul, Ishul!”

Speak of the devil. When he turned at the sound of his name, he saw Ner peeking out from the shadow of the wall, making a beckoning gesture. Ner, whose square winter hat was currently pulled down low over his eyes, was a whole two years younger than Ishul. Ishul was about to turn twelve. It was almost a year since his last birthday, when he’d taken Pedryuvka in. She’d been hurt, and the rest of her flock left her behind during their migration. Last year’s birthday present had ended up being permission from his parents to keep her as a pet, as long as he took responsibility for her himself.

“The girl woke up!” Ner reported with shining eyes, as if he was sharing an important secret. Ishul hunched his shoulders, a little exasperated. Ner was childishly thrilled to have visitors from outside after they’d gone so long without seeing any, but Ishul knew the grown-ups weren’t happy to have them here. *Outsiders invite disaster*. Grown-ups said that all the time. “Let’s go check it out, Ishul.”

“You go without me.”

“Come *on*, let’s go!” Ner grabbed Ishul’s hand and pulled, ignoring his refusal. Ishul sighed. *Guess I’ve got no choice.* He raised his left arm up high above his head.

“Pedryuvka, you keep an eye on the quee.”

Flapping her sandy wings, Pedryuvka pushed off Ishul’s arm with her foot and took flight, soaring back up into the pale, sandy sky over the far-north tundra.

The quee were relatively small plant-eaters with fur on their backs the color of burnt tea that was stiff and thick enough to line winter clothes with. The hair on their bellies was soft, and you could use it for insulation. They produced milk, and you could eat their meat, and you could make their innards into sausages, and they were strong for their size, so you could use the young ones for pack animals, too.

Ishul’s tribe raised these quee, moving from ruin site to ruin site about once every six months to let them graze on what scant grass grew there.

From what he’d heard, the ruined buildings they were living in right now had been built before the War started. The grown-ups and the First People never talked much about the War. They only told Ishul and the others the bare minimum, which was that there’d been a big war a long, long time ago, so to them it didn’t feel very real. But Ishul loved books, and he’d once read one that a traveler from Below had left behind, so he felt as if he at least knew more about the War than Ner and the others did.

These ruins were from even longer ago than that. They used to be a prison camp for criminals who did bad stuff and got exiled here, or something, so there were a ton of little rooms with barred windows lining the winding hallways. It might be old, but it was still in decent shape on the inside. They’d settled down to live in one part of it, and used the crumbling outer wall as a fence to keep in the quee when they put them to pasture.

These guests they’d supposedly picked up yesterday on a wild plain about half a day’s travel south of here had been assigned their own room in the ruins, one with a window that faced the pasture. The southern wilderness was close to the Below, so they hardly ever went there, but that day the First People had sensed a disturbance

in a big magnetic field, and the radio tower had gone to investigate. Word was that they'd picked up these two refugees on their way back home.

Ishul let Ner drag him along until they got to the guests' room, where a tall, skinny boy and a little girl sat camped out next to the doorway.

"Ishul, Ner, what took you so long?" the boy whispered anxiously, lifting his head. Little Litta hopped to her feet and ran over to them. Besides Ishul and Ner, there was Paul, who might be tall but was really a chicken, and his tiny little sister, Litta, who didn't talk much. That was it. They were the only children living here, unless you counted the baby that had just been born a few days ago. The others pushed Ishul to stand in front as they peeked cautiously around the door frame into the room. They crouched behind Ishul and craned their heads around him to see in order from tallest to shortest: Paul, then Ner, then Litta. Ishul directed an exasperated look behind him and then peeked into the room again.

It had been heated toasty warm inside. There was only one bed, covered with a quilt. Ishul saw a pretty ancient-looking radio by the head of the bed and a figure lifting her head from the pillow to sit up: a girl who looked a few years older than he was. He'd heard that one of their guests was a girl with the beginnings of frostbite. She seemed a little weakened, and he saw cracks in the fair skin of her cheeks. The only women he knew were tiny little Litta (though he wasn't convinced Litta actually counted as a "woman") and the grown-ups here, in other words his and Ner's and Paul's mothers, who were strong and wrapped in layers of fat on top of the muscle and had deep voices, too. So this slim and feeble-looking girl seemed completely mysterious, and completely beautiful.

She was talking to someone, smiling softly at the person. When he followed her gaze, he saw a man perched on the edge of the bed.

When Ishul saw what the man looked like, he was a little shocked. Now he understood why the others had been scared enough to call him over.

He was really skinny considering how tall he was, with reddish, rusty-looking hair. A sore covered half his face so that it looked like iron rust had eaten its way into the skin, his left hand was wrecked, and his right arm was missing. The empty sleeve was jammed into the pocket of some weird-looking black outfit that Ishul had never seen before.

The most shocking thing of all was that he had almost the exact same air about him as the First People.

"I heard he's related to the First People," breathed Ner behind him, sounding strangely proud. He loved to play informant. "But he's not like them; he didn't run away like the First People! He fought in the War..." Ner whispered with something like reverence, and swallowed.

He fought in the War... Unconsciously holding his breath, Ishul examined the man. He sure didn't *look* tough enough for it. Paul was tall, too, and Ishul himself was pretty good in a fight. In a stick fight, he could even hold his own against a grown-up (he thought). And Ner was quick and light on his feet as a cat.

The girl seemed to be doing her best to start up a conversation with him, but he just sort of let the chatter wash over him while he smoked. *Look at that guy, being all gruff with a sick girl*, Ishul thought, feeling displeased with him. It didn't help that Ishul was already a little enchanted by the girl. For her part, the girl settled her eyes on the man's lips around the cigarette and stared at them as though she wanted to say something. The man gave her a look that said, *What?* She blushed and shook her head furiously, looking down. When she touched the tips of her fingers to her own lips and darted a glance up at him through her lashes, he pulled back a little and avoided her gaze as if he was sort of scared for some reason.

What the heck was that all about? Apparently this exchange passed for communication between the two of them, but Ishul and the others couldn't decode it at all.

The girl pouted a little, and leaned forward in bed and started to edge toward the man, then abruptly fell back on the sheets as if she had lost control of her muscles. All the kids gasped in unison and then slapped their hands over one another's mouths before they could cry out. They kept on peeking.

The man's face changed, and his hand groped uneasily around the surface of the bed almost as if he'd lost sight of where she was. When she put her own hand over his and whispered something, he looked so relieved...He gave a faint, soft smile that was totally unlike the gruff expression he'd had so far, and he helped her back up as carefully as though she were a precious family heirloom. The girl looked relieved, too, if a little shy, as she leaned against him.

She pressed her ear to his chest as if to say *I'm right here*.

The children stood stiff as boards with their hands covering one

another's mouths to keep quiet, just staring at them. They couldn't make out what the guests whispered to each other, but it wasn't too hard to tell how much the two meant to each other. They seemed connected, sort of like a parent and a child, and also sort of like what Paul and Litta were as brother and sister, and at the same time like nothing Ishul recognized. Like they had some bond between them that Ishul and the others didn't know about yet.

"What are you doing?" a voice behind them suddenly demanded, and they literally jumped. Ner's mother, a stout woman in a leather vest and a heavy skirt, was looking down at them with a steaming stew pot in her hands. At the sound of her voice the pair inside the room noticed them, too, and turned their faces to the door.

Ner turned pale. "N-nothing!"

There was no way that would fly with her, though. She glared not only at Ner, but at each one of them in turn. "Why aren't you watching the queue?"

"We are. Run!" On Ishul's signal, they all whooped loudly and shot past the large woman, fleeing down the hallway at full speed.



The grown-ups weren't even pretending to welcome their guests. The girl spent most of her time sick in bed with weakness and mild frostbite, so they were all taking turns looking after her, but it wouldn't be inaccurate to take that as an expression of how much they wanted her to get well quick and get out. The adults, and particularly the First People who were the Elders of their clan, didn't welcome outsiders. The First People had lived in secret ever since they'd fled from Below during the War, so they didn't like visitors who could end up involving them with Below.

When he got a little older, Ishul wanted to go have a look at the world Below. Supposedly there were lots and lots more people Below than in their tiny closed-up world here. He'd never told anyone how he felt, though. They were bound to get mad at him, and if he was unlucky they might even keep a guard on him to make sure he didn't do anything stupid.

"You've been Below, right, Pedryuvka? What was it like?" he asked the one-legged bird perched on his left arm pecking the jerky

in his right hand. Engrossed in her dinner, Pedryuvka didn't answer.

The grown-ups were busy with the fields and the flock, and aside from the women doing bare-minimum caretaking like making sure they had food and heat, there weren't many adults who went near the guests. In their tribe, the men worked in the dinky little fields that were a good walk from here, and the women and children took care of the livestock. They'd lived here in the northern lands for a hundred years now, ever since the First People. The First People shut themselves up in a room deep in the ruins and almost never came out, though, so Ishul'd only met them a few times.

But that man visiting—he was one of the First People's race. The adults didn't call people like him by their nickname, but Ishul had read it in a book: They used to be called "Demons of War."

Things got started two days after they'd arrived.

Ner was the one to think up the plan; it was the kind of little prank he was always pulling. Ishul was the one who actually made it work and gave the orders while they carried it out, though, so it would be fair to call him the ringleader. Ner's ideas were always full of holes, after all, and he'd never be able to pull them off if Ishul didn't lend a hand. This plan was...well, it wasn't anything special, really. First, Ishul would use Pedryuvka to distract the girl while the man wasn't in the room.



“Pedryuvka, go,” he whispered, stretching his left arm in front of him. Pedryuvka flew straight for the window of the guests’ room. As Ishul kept watch from the shadow of the broken-down outer wall, the girl appeared in the window at the sound of her flapping wings. When he saw her there, with a shawl in their tribe’s special pattern wrapped around her frail shoulders (maybe Ner’s mom had given it to her?), his heart leaped a little in his chest without his permission.

She opened the window and looked left and right. When she saw Pedryuvka perched on the eaves, she blinked a few times and then smiled softly. “Hello,” she said, as naturally as if she were talking to a person and not a bird at all. Ishul was a little surprised. There’d never been anyone here who talked to Pedryuvka besides him. For a second his mind went blank, and he almost forgot the next part of the plan before hurriedly pulling himself together.

Now, Ner.

Ishul signaled from his spot in the shadows of the outer wall, waving toward the girl’s back. Ner and Paul, who’d been watching from the doorway, crouched down low and slipped into the room, creeping up to her bed. When Ner reached out toward the radio by her pillow, it suddenly let out a grating burst of noise. Ner and Paul freaked. The girl looked as if she was about to turn around, so Ishul immediately put his fingers to his mouth.

Pedryuvka! When he whistled softly to her, Pedryuvka took off from her perch on the eaves, drawing the girl’s attention again. Ner and Paul took advantage of the distraction to snatch the radio and make their escape. They gave him the “success” signal from the doorway. He signaled back that he understood.

Time to retreat, Pedryuvka.

He put his fingers in his mouth and gave a long whistle, and Pedryuvka flew away high above them. The bewildered girl was left all alone at the window. Ishul grinned and hightailed it out of there.

He met up with Ner and the others behind the quee shed. “It worked.” He and Ner grinned at each other and bumped their gloved fists together. “Where’d you hide it?”

“In the watchtower at the ruins on the hill.”

“Perfect.”

The “ruins on the hill” meant a collection of ruined buildings on top of a low hill about a kilometer north. It was in seriously bad shape and not livable, but the kids used it as a place to play (mostly war games and hide-and-seek). Of course, the grown-ups told them they weren’t allowed to go in there because it was too dangerous.

“Hey, this is stealing, right...? Maybe we shouldn’t be doing this...” worried Paul, the chicken. *Way to throw a wet blanket on everything.* Ishul grunted in annoyance.

“Oh please. He’s a Demon of War. If he gets scared of the maze in the ruins, that just means he’s a fake.”

“Right, but he’s a Demon of War! If we make him angry...”

“What, are you getting cold feet?”

Paul looked as though he wanted to say more, but he stopped at Ishul’s glare.

When they went back to the spot along the outer wall where they could see the guest room window and took a look from the shadows, the man had come back and he and the girl were talking about something. The girl was explaining something with frantic gestures. She drew a rectangle in the air with both hands and then waved them wildly...even Ishul could tell she was trying to say that the rectangular thing was missing. He smiled to himself.

The man’s expression changed instantly. His face lost way more color than Ishul thought made sense (who got this upset over losing a beat-up radio like that?), and he ran out of the room with a gesture to the girl to stay where she was.

Once Ishul had seen him leave, he whispered, “You come later,” to his friends and left the shadow of the wall and jogged toward the building. “Come, Pedryuvka.”

When he gave a short whistle, Pedryuvka stopped circling in the air and settled onto his shoulder. He bumped into the man just as he came running out of the building. Literally, too: Ishul ended up right in front of the taller man and got knocked to the side. The man, who’d seemed about to keep right on running, slowed his steps as if he’d just now noticed Ishul there. “Oh, sorry,” he apologized gruffly, and steadied Ishul’s arm as he stumbled. Pedryuvka had taken off right before the collision. Now she came back down to perch on Ishul’s shoulder again.

The man started to breeze past him without another word, so he called out, a little flustered, “Um, are you looking for a radio?”

The man stopped again and turned to look at him. Ishul flinched before he could help himself at the glare the tall man cast down at him, and then felt annoyed with himself for it.

He didn't let any of that show on the surface, though. Faking a good-boy attitude, he said, "I'm sorry. My bird—her name is Pedryuvka—likes to collect junk, and I think she stole it..." *Sorry for sticking you with a bad rap, Pedryuvka. I'll give you some sausage meat later, okay?* Your favorite, he apologized silently, ducking his head. The part about Pedryuvka being a junk collector was true, though. She'd hidden lots of things from them before: Ishul's shoe, Litta's doll, Ner's hat, all kinds of stuff. Not that that had anything to do with this particular instance. The man stared down at Ishul for a while without changing his expression, but after a bit he relaxed his scowl. Maybe he'd decided to believe him. Ishul breathed a sigh of relief. That scowl had fixed him in place where he stood.

"Where'd she take it?"

"She keeps her treasures in a hiding place in the ruins on the hill. I'll show you the way there."

The plan was as good as half-complete. As he started walking the man toward the ruins, he winked at the other kids standing by in the shadows and signaled with a hand behind his back for them to follow.



"They say the ruins on the hill are cursed. That's why none of the grown-ups go in there," Ishul said while they walked, randomly making up the ghost story as he went along to try to really get the guy spooked. The ruins on the hill were the remains of buildings surrounded by a town wall. The ceilings had completely caved in and the walls were crumbling here and there, which meant some of their passages were blocked and the place was a little bit of a maze now. It was the kind of place that gave you a sinking feeling at your first glance, with the smells of mold and dust settled over its gloomy paths, which made it pretty much the perfect place for a test of courage. Pedryuvka took off from her perch on Ishul's arm and soared away toward the watchtower. Only a glimpse of the very top of it was visible from here over the wall. The loud beating of wings made the whole atmosphere even creepier.

"Pedryuvka hides her treasures in the watchtower in the middle. So nobody else can go get her things. But you're tough, right, Mister? I heard from the grown-ups"—read from a book, actually—"that you were super-tough during the War. So stuff like this doesn't scare you, right?" Ishul egged him on casually. The man narrowed his eyes and sort of glared down at Ishul for a while. This guy got an amazingly ugly look in his eyes when he looked at someone's face. A little intimidated again in spite of himself, Ishul waited for his response.

Eventually the man abruptly broke eye contact without saying anything and began walking deeper into the ruins. As Ishul jogged to catch up with his long strides, he darted a glance over his shoulder. When he'd confirmed that Ner and the others were tailing them from the shadows, he gave them the thumbs-up and followed after the man.

The inside of the ruins was closed in by walls on both sides so that it wasn't too easy to see anything, and the thick smell of mold and dust attacked your nostrils when you went inside. Those things made it eerie enough on their own, but on top of that, the place had traps here and there that Ishul and his friends used when they played war.

When Ishul darted another glance behind him as he walked after the man, even Ner and the others were looking around them with slightly fearful expressions. Ishul hunched his shoulders irritably. *What's the point of you getting scared?* It'd been their playground since they were little. The whole curse thing was a lie, obviously, and Ishul knew this place like he knew his own bedroom. "That way."

Ishul slipped past him to lead the way. The man followed along at his own pace, taking his own sweet time and trailing his hand along the wall as though he was scoping out the feel of the mossy concrete. Ishul kept jogging a little past him and then stopping to wait as he led him deeper and deeper into the crisscrossing ruins. The dimness and the dusty, sour smell both got stronger as they made their way farther. *I guess this is just about right...*

Timing it so that he'd just led his victim deep into the maze, Ishul picked up speed and turned around a corner and out of the man's sight, then dived into a crack in the wall hidden in a dark shadow where it was hard to see. The crack was just big enough for Ishul to fit through. Even if that man found it, he was too tall for it

to do him any good. Ishul hunkered down inside and waited, holding his breath, until the somewhat unsteady footsteps along the wall approached his hiding place, passed in front of it, and kept going.

“Ishul?”

Ishul covered his mouth with both hands to keep himself from laughing.

Once he'd heard the footsteps turn the next corner and grow farther away, he crawled out of the crevice and back into the corridors again. He gazed down the hallway and grinned. “Okay, now the games begin. Let's see Mr. Demon of War cry.”

He took a shortcut to the watchtower at the center of the maze. When he got there, Ner, Paul, and Litta, who'd arrived first, giggled and stuck their heads out of the tower's little window. “Shh!” Ishul warned them, putting his finger to his lips. “Keep your heads down.” He was grinning, too, though.

The top of the watchtower had collapsed a long time ago, so it wasn't very tall now; just five or six meters. A little room near the top was their secret base. The window of that room had a panoramic view of the maze. Ishul climbed up the ladder to join them.

“Well?”

“He's lost, all right,” Ner answered him with a laugh from where he peeked outside from the edge of the window. When Ishul walked up next to him and looked out too, he could see the man's red-brown hair far down below. He looked small from this distance. He was wandering around lost with his hand trailing along the wall of the maze. Ishul and Ner giggled to each other at the sight. As usual, only Paul periodically looked troubled and said things like, “I wonder if we'll get in trouble for doing this to a guest...”

“It'll be fine. The grown-ups want to kick them out anyway.”

“Yeah. If you're scared, just go home.”

Once Ner backed Ishul in his taunts, Paul buckled under the peer pressure and clammed up. Litta was sitting on the bed of hay playing with the stolen radio. The beat-up old radio with its crazy warped speaker was apparently as broken as it looked, because no matter how much Litta fiddled with the tuner, it only leaked gritty static. Pedryuvka perched on a post at the edge of the hay bed, tidying her feathers with her beak. The truth was, all kinds of junk Pedryuvka had collected was buried in this hay.

The concrete blocks that made up the floor of the ruins had crumbled unevenly, and the footing was pretty bad. As they watched him from the tower, the man tripped over cracks every so often and reeled forward. "Look, he fell!" Ishul and Ner laughed together, and Paul moaned.

"Any minute now," said Ner.

"Yeah." Ishul nodded and tried to control his own enthusiasm, staring hard at the man. He'd almost reached the trap they'd set up for playing war—

The man walked straight into the thin thread stretched across the passage at ankle height and fell over, making a bunch of empty tin cans clank together overhead.

"Ahahaha! He walked right into it!"

Ishul and Ner rolled around on the floor laughing, clutching their stomachs. A Demon of War getting caught in a simple trap like that? This guy was no big thing at all! And he'd read in the book that there'd been a ton of traps like that in the field during the War, too.

Eventually the man got to his knees and pushed himself back up to his feet. He looked back and forth between the thread at his feet and the tin cans threaded above his head for a while. That was all, though. Otherwise he didn't show any particular reaction as he stood up, put his hand against the wall again, and started walking along the uneven floor of the maze again. The watchtower looked pretty close from there, but it wasn't actually easy to get to. Ishul might know these ruins like his own bedroom, but if you came in not knowing the way and just walked around willy-nilly, you'd end up going in circles.

Sure enough, after he'd walked for a while, the man was about to make it right back to that same trap.

"Think he'll fall for it again?" Ner whispered.

"No way," answered Ishul without taking his eyes off the man. *Yeah, right. As if a Demon of War would get himself caught in a dumb trap like that more than once.* What he really wanted to see was how a Demon of War would get through the traps to beat this maze. He watched in eager anticipation, but the man got caught in the same trap as before and fell down again. The cans rang noisily. Ner clutched his belly and laughed again. Ishul stifled a laugh of his own, too. *He did it again... This guy might be a real idiot.*

But after that, the man circled the same path over and over

again with his hand still trailing the wall, and stumbled over and over again on the broken floor, and walked into the trap and fell over and over again. Each time, Ner rolled around laughing, and Paul dithered, and the smile on Ishul's face faded a little more.

What's the deal? Ishul silently growled in annoyance. His excitement steadily wore off until it wasn't any fun to watch at all.

Ishul stared fixedly down at the man stumbling around the maze. When he saw him trip for the umpteenth time, he abruptly stood up and walked away from the window.

"Eh, forget this." The laughing Ner and dithering Paul both turned and gave him puzzled looks. "This is boring. I'm going home," Ishul barked as a parting shot. Then he started climbing down the ladder.

"Ishul?" Ner and Paul started to follow him, flustered, but Ishul didn't even glance at them. He jumped violently down the last few rungs of the ladder in his irritation and stalked quickly down the road home.

What's the deal?

He gave another silent growl. He'd never thought a Demon of War would be so helpless and pathetic. The truth was, deep down Ishul'd had high hopes. He'd been so sure that a Demon of War must be really tough and cool. That his ancestors, the First People, hadn't just run away from the War because they were scared.

And yet...*What's the deal with this?!*

He rapidly lost all enthusiasm. He'd always wondered what it was like Below. He'd always longed to go see for himself someday. Now he felt as though even that dream had been smashed, and it made him feel pissed off and disappointed.

Ner and Paul were busy being confused behind him at how steamed up he was, and now Pedryuvka was coming after him from above. Ishul kept right on walking without even offering his arm to her. She circled the air above him, looking lost.



The feel of the wall beneath his left hand changed slightly. When he raised his head to look up, his cloudy, narrow field of vision caught that the tower wall here was taller than the walls he'd been following so far. *Hey, I'm here...*

Harvey was just the teensiest bit impressed with himself for making it here on the strength of his instincts after being so lost.

Ugh, and then there were those dumb traps...

He'd known he was walking in circles by the second lap, but he hadn't had much choice but to keep on circling until he found a different route by touch. His sight wasn't good enough to distinguish little differences in the walls anymore. *Stupid brats...*

He wasn't especially pissed about the kids' prank, but he was tired.

Anyway, the important thing was that he had to hurry, or it would be *too late*. He found the ladder on the wall of the watchtower and climbed it one rung at a time on unsteady feet. Probably some of the tower was missing now, because it wasn't too tall, only about five or six meters. His anxiousness made it seem much taller. His foot missed the top rung, and for a moment he thought he was going to fall, but he somehow managed to throw himself into the space at the top of the structure.

It was basically just a small room. The thing about this place being a cursed maze that nobody ever entered was a lie, of course; the scent in the air told him that more than one person had been here not too long ago.

He could hazily make out that a bed of hay took up almost half the floor. When he plunged his hand into the hay and rummaged through it, all he could find was junk: a lone shoe, a leather glove without its mate, a chipped cup...Little by little by little, he started to panic.

"Corporal?" he called out loud.

Fzzsh...bzzzzzt...

A faint hum of static answered him from underneath all the hay and pieces of junk. The tension drained out of him, and his face relaxed. He felt his way through the hay, looking for the radio. Then he felt the rusty casing against his fingers. *Oh, good...*

If he hurried, he could probably make it back to Kieli before it was too late. Harvey started to dig out the radio.

"Hmm?"

The strap went tense and started to drag something up with it. It was caught on something...Harvey lowered his gaze and squinted. He saw something move languidly at the bottom of the pile of hay, and then he heard a tiny yawn.



“Ner! Ishul!” Ner’s mom yelled furiously at them the second they got back. Paul backed away, his naturally pale face going even paler, and Ner dived behind Ishul to hide. Which meant that in the end, Ishul was left standing there facing her head-on.

“Wh-what? We cleaned up the shed like we were supposed to,” Ishul shot back in spite of his nervousness. The girl visitor peeked tentatively around the woman’s large body. She seemed a little weak still, but apparently she was well enough to leave her room.

“You’re the ones who stole from our guests, aren’t you? Only the worst kind of people steal things!” She put her hands on her ample hips and glared down at them.

“We didn’t steal it. That was Pedryuvka—”

“Don’t you blame this on the bird!”

The force of her yell knocked Ishul back a step. Ner gave a little cry as Ishul’s back collided with his nose. Ner’s mother treated everybody’s kids with equal caring, just the same as she treated Ner, but she was also equally scary to all of them. He liked her well enough, but there were plenty of times when he wished she’d give him a break.

“So your name is Ishul?”

The girl stepped forward, holding the patterned shawl around her shoulders. She was a little bit taller than Ishul. She stooped down a little to look him right in the eye. “Do you know where it is? Please, it’s very special to me.”

Ishul squirmed uncomfortably. She sounded so earnest. He traded sidelong glances with Ner, who was standing behind him. He wavered a little, but in the end he gave in and came clean in a mumble. “That man went to the ruins on the hill to look for it...”

“You took him to that maze?! I just can’t believe you little runts!” Ner’s mom shouted at them and smacked each child on the head in turn with her palm. By the time she got to Paul, he was half-crying and mumbling incoherent apologies.

“It’s a maze?” the girl asked the older woman, some of the color draining from her face. Auntie sighed (whenever she sighed, her ample chest bounced up and down) and said, “Well, it’s a place where kids play. So it’s not a very hard maze...”

“Ishul,” the girl said. Her voice and the expression on her face

were both mild, but it felt as if her deep-black eyes were sucking him in and reading his mind. They transfixed him, and he couldn't move or look away. Since Ishul wasn't actually innocent, something about them stung his heart hard. "He can't see very well. Didn't you notice?"

"Huh...?"

Ishul was speechless. That was the last thing he'd expected to hear.

He hadn't noticed, not at all. Now that she mentioned it, sure, the man had narrowed his eyes really fiercely whenever he'd looked at Ishul's face (Ishul'd guessed he was just naturally sinister-looking), and he'd always trailed his hand along the wall while they were walking through the maze, and he'd fallen for the same trap over and over again—but Ishul didn't remember him showing a trace of fear or hesitation when they'd been walking through places with nothing to hold on to. If Ishul couldn't see...he knew he'd be too scared to walk.

...Maybe these Demons of War really were tough after all. Was that why they weren't scared even when they couldn't see?

"Please, take me there."

"You shouldn't push yourself, miss. You're not well yet," interrupted the old lady, but the girl shook her head, never taking her eyes off Ishul.

"Please. They're very special to me...the radio and him both. Take me there."

He didn't hear any blame in her voice. What did come across, though, was exactly how much she cared about that man she was with. All of a sudden Ishul felt totally childish. He was ashamed of himself. He'd lured their visitor into the ruins because of the stupid urge to pull a prank and then left him there because he was pissed at the man for not living up to the picture he'd built up in his own head. He started to feel like a really disgusting person, and all that disappointment and annoyance suddenly subsided.

Ishul gave in; he was convinced. He dropped his gaze uncomfortably, unable to look at her.

That was when Ner's mom squeaked, "Hey! Wait a minute; where's Litta?"

Ishul raised his eyes and looked at Ner, and then they both turned to Paul. After all, it was his job as Litta's brother to keep an eye on her. Paul stared dumbly at them for a second when the

conversation turned to him and then let out a little squeak.

“I forgot her!”



“I’m beat...” Harvey muttered, leaning the back of his head against the wall of the ruins and looking up at the sky. With what vision he still had, he could more or less make out what color it was; streaks of copper were beginning to take it over. He could smell the twilight coming. The sun would set soon.

Meanwhile, he was currently sitting with his legs flung out in front of him and a little girl on his lap, listening to her peaceful breathing. She seemed to be having a nice nap. When she’d crawled out from under the hay, yawning, she’d said she knew a shortcut back home, so he’d asked her to show him, with the result that now they were even more lost than before. Harvey had a fairly decent sense of direction, so he at least knew which general direction the exit was in, but with the paths twisting and turning and crisscrossing like this, it was still hard to find his way out now that he had to pretty much feel his way forward by hand.

He wasn’t completely blind, but his left eye hardly worked anymore, and his range of vision in his right eye was extremely narrow. Whenever he tried to use his sense of sight to check on anything, his eyes naturally narrowed to an ugly glare.

Slumped back against the wall, he gazed at the sky without thinking much of anything about it. The radio’s feeble static permeated the air. For a while now, the noise had been slowly but surely getting weaker. Still, its sound so thin it seemed forced, the radio kept on playing its final static.

If he didn’t hurry back, he wouldn’t make it in time. The girl had gotten tired out from walking and had fallen asleep; Harvey felt himself getting anxious, but he couldn’t just drag her along by the ankle while he walked in circles again.

“Sorry, Corporal...I’ll get us home to matter what, so hang in there a little longer for me...” He crouched forward, embracing the tiny sleeping girl on his lap from above to bring his face close to the speaker of the radio she refused to let go of.

The radio answered him with a little kind-sounding static. “It’s okay...” it seemed to say. “*You just let her get some sleep,*” it sang,

the static lilting like a lullaby for the little girl.

Without warning, Harvey found himself smiling. Even now—even now, when he was about to leave this world—the ghost possessing this radio was still a sucker for little kids. It was just so very *him*, and the *him*-ness of it made Harvey happy, somehow. A warm feeling spread through him from the center of his body outward.

“Yeah, Corporal. It’s okay now, isn’t it...? It’s enough, it’s all finished now...” His voice shook a little, but his heart was quiet inside him.

“*Yeah...Man, I’m tired,*” the static seemed to say. There was a laugh in its tone. Harvey thought for a moment he could see a thin soldier’s face quirking up in a friendly smile with just a touch of irony.

“Thanks...for hanging on all this time...”

Kshht. “*You did too,*” the static said.

“Heh, I guess I did.” He pressed his forehead to the warped speaker in a sort of little bow. “I owe you a lot. I’m grateful...”

Harvey closed his eyes and gave thanks from the bottom of his heart: for this ghost in the radio who had undeniably been their guardian, for how he’d brought Harvey and Kieli this far, spurring them on and pulling them along, for their meeting in that plagued town, for his many scoldings, for his hearty laughter that could so easily dispel a gloomy atmosphere, for all the music he’d hammered into Harvey’s head whether Harvey liked it or not, and for the many, so very many human feelings he’d taught him...

Fshhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

There was a noise like the sound of a quiet rain falling on an abandoned battlefield. Little by little, it grew weaker.

Eventually it broke off.

That was the last noise the radio ever made.

Drained, Harvey let his back rest against the wall and gazed vacantly at the sky. The girl in his lap stirred and lifted her head a little.

He heard the sounds of muffled voices and jogging footsteps approaching.

Harvey saw several small forms come running toward him from beyond the ruined walls that looked dark in his fading vision. The one in front was probably that boy Ishul, with the other kids following him. And bringing up the rear, he made out a girl in a shawl. The children stopped still when they caught sight of him; only Kieli kept going, brushing past them and jogging up to him.

Her ragged breath came to a stop a little ways in front of him. He could tell that she was struggling for her first words, her shoulders heaving a bit as she panted.

Even if he could hardly see anything else, he could tell what expression she was wearing right now with a strange clarity. Just as he'd been able to hear the radio's noise as the words behind it, she stood out against the darkness like a soft guiding light even now that almost all the rest of the world's light was gone. He could always see exactly what expression she wore on her face, whether she was smiling or trying not to cry.

The little girl sat up from his lap. Kieli traded looks with her, and she held up the radio to give it back.

As Kieli accepted it, she bent her knees and plopped down to the floor in front of him.

"Sorry," Harvey murmured to her. His voice sounded a little hoarse. "I wanted to hurry back to you, but I didn't make it in time..."

Before he finished, the girl's pale, slightly chilly palms cradled his cheeks. She looked at him with watery dark eyes, smiled slightly, and shook her head. "It's okay..." she said in a teary voice, softly drawing his head into her embrace. Harvey let her. He rested his forehead on her shoulder.

"Rest in peace, Corporal..." Her voice cut very quietly through the twilight ruins.

"Yeah. Rest in peace..." Harvey repeated against her shoulder in a muffled voice.

Those were their final words of farewell to the ghost in the radio.

The radio would never interrupt the two of them again, never encourage them or scold them again, or ever play old music for them again either.

But if they closed their eyes, they could see that open-hearted

and cheerful ghost in the radio, the one who always complained nonstop while watching over them anyway, whenever they wanted.



Episode 2: Heaven

A long time ago, there'd been a great war on this planet. A long, ugly war that embroiled the whole world, used up all the planet's resources, and spilled the blood of many.

That war gradually numbed the hearts of the people, until eventually they committed an act so aberrant it went beyond the boundaries of human behavior: they reused the bodies of soldiers who died in battle, turning them into weapons of massacre who would never die again. Who lacked the fear of death.

Facial features that didn't belong to any age she could pinpoint, neither old nor young; ashen skin and parched lips; long, black hair streaked with white that probably hadn't been cut for decades. The bodies underneath their thick, worn clothes had begun to rot. That's what the "First People" were like...They were Undyings. *Were*, she supposed, past tense. They were already crumbling away now. They said they'd been made from crystallized fossil fuel harvested back when this planet was just getting off the ground. These were the first Undyings.

The three of them, leaning heavily against the backs of three creaking rocking chairs in front of the orange flames in the fireplace and speaking slowly and hoarsely, could almost have been a set of traditional tribal sculptures someone had left in this room for decoration. All the lamps in the room were turned off. Only the flickering light from the fireplace let her pick out their decaying profiles in the dimness.

"We lived on this land in secret for a long time without knowing the War had ended."

"It was about forty years ago now that we learned the War had ended. But we have kept on living here nonetheless, together with the children and grandchildren born to us. This land is peaceful, and there are no wars. It lets us forget the pain of the past war."

"Young one..."

That was what they called Harvey. Apparently from the first

Undyings' perspective, Harvey was still a young whippersnapper even after living more than eighty years.

"We do not care for contact with the culture of the world Below."

"War is sure to break out again one day. We do not care to be involved in it."

"We would appreciate it if you would leave quickly and forget all about us. We shall direct the radio tower to the southern wilderness for you."

Listening to all of this at Harvey's side, Kieli couldn't help feeling the beginnings of fury.

These people were what you called "deserters"—they said that during the War era they'd run away from the fighting and lived in hiding here in the far-northern wilderness; that they had lived quietly out of the way here for more than a hundred years now, bringing up their few offspring. On the one hand there were Harvey and the others, who had lived through the War without running, who had been hounded after it ended, too, without any way to escape their fates. And on the other hand were these people, who were acting as if there hadn't ever been any War at all, living in peace and not even teaching these kids who didn't know anything what an ugly thing war was—

"Kieli."

Harvey's voice quietly held her back. Maybe he'd read her mood from the way her hands were fisted at her sides. Kieli reluctantly swallowed down her anger, lowering her face to hide her scowl. Harvey always calmly kept her fury in check.

"We don't plan to stay long," he told them. Harvey paid these seniors in life their due by speaking politely, by Harvey standards. "If you'd be so kind as to take us somewhere near the capital, we'll leave right away."

"We do not mind if you rest before you go. However, we do not want you to stay long. We wish for you to understand that."

"Well, then...we'll take you up on your offer. She's not well again yet." Harvey put his arm around Kieli's shoulders and squeezed lightly, making a pointed show of concern. Personally, Kieli felt she was fit as a fiddle again by now, so if they weren't welcome here she was ready and willing to go, but if Harvey wanted to stay, she didn't have any particular objections, either.

They left the room, Harvey urging her along in front of him. His

hand on her shoulder was slightly tense. Kieli could tell from the feel of it that Harvey was surprisingly angry at them, too, and trying to rein it in.

“I envy you, for being able to forget the War. But I do think there’s a difference between really forgetting and pretending nothing happened,” Harvey tossed back at them before he left the room. He kept his attitude respectful, but his voice was biting.

And then...

It was soon after that day that Harvey started acting more and more off.



“This is heavy, you know. Will you be okay?”

“I’m fine.”

With a little *oof*, Kieli picked up the big tin pail full of fresh quee milk with both hands. She immediately stumbled under the weight. Ner’s mother laughed loudly and heartily, ample chest heaving. Kieli answered with an embarrassed laugh of her own as she managed to stop reeling and get her footing back.

With the First People, the tribe’s elders, so blatantly unwelcoming, the rest of the tribe usually didn’t actively try to interact with them either. Ner’s mother was the exception. She was a really cheerful and open person. In fact, she was so spirited that Kieli tended to shrink back from her a little.

Since Kieli was stuck with the clothes she’d escaped the capital in and hadn’t even had a real sweater or jacket to wear, Ner’s mom had lent her some clothes in their tribe’s style. Now she was hard at work with her hair tied back in a ponytail, wearing a long skirt made of heavy fabric, a blouse, a leather vest, and a shawl around her shoulders embroidered with a strange geometric pattern that apparently represented quee horns. Evidently quee milk was really nutritious, and Kieli’d gotten well in no time because they’d fed her soup made out of it.

“Quee” were the animals they raised for food here. They were fairly small, meek herbivores that looked sort of like a cross between a horse and a sheep. They had two crooked horns on their heads, and they were covered with long, stiff fur the color of burnt tea. They spent all day peacefully eating what little grass grew in

the impoverished soil. They weren't even in any of the illustrated animal encyclopedias at school; these animals didn't exist at all in the civilization Kieli knew. They must have evolved to thrive in this particular climate in the far-north tundra.

As for the people here, there were twenty-odd men and women, plus four children and one newborn baby. It was an extremely small tribe.

A few of the children were outside brandishing long sticks and whooping as they herded the quee. She saw a tall boy and a smaller boy—that's right; the tall one was Paul, and the smaller one was Ner, who was a lively boy that strongly reminded her of his mother. The children here weren't ever sent to school (since the tribe didn't have such a thing); they worked just like the adults.

Would this tribe go on to grow and flourish more? Or would it begin to die out along with the decaying First People...?

Kieli didn't know what future they were headed for. She just hoped that these children's carefree laughter would live on.

"I'll carry that," called one of the boys, leaving the flock of quee and jogging up to her. He more or less snatched the handle of the pail from Kieli's hands, leaving her gaping at him with her suddenly empty hands hovering in the air. The boy looked away awkwardly as he hoisted up the milk pail. His name was Ishul, and he was basically the leader of the kids here. A warm square hat with flaps over the ears framed his lightly freckled face. His features still had a childlike innocence about them. The whole tribe had unruly dark hair and pale skin like his, but Ishul's hair had a little more red in it than everyone else's.



He must be used to this chore, because even though he was a slight, thin boy, he hauled the giant milk pail a lot less precariously than Kieli had. After a moment, he looked down with a sulky expression and mumbled in an undertone, "Um...I'm sorry about before."

Kieli blinked for a second. Then she let out a little laugh before she could help it.

"Don't worry about it. He doesn't worry about that kind of thing."

Kieli let her eyes wander off to the side. She could see a young man there, sitting against the wall right underneath the window of the room they were staying in, the one with the view of the whole quee flock. His long legs were sprawled out on the ground, and he leaned his back against the wall with the radio perched on his lap, gazing carelessly in front of him.

"...How come his eyes are so bad?" the boy asked hesitantly, looking in the same direction as Kieli.

"Mmm...Maybe because he's worked so hard for so long, I guess," Kieli answered with a wry smile, still watching Harvey out of the corner of her eye.

Ishul gave a little hum in response that could have meant anything and then said, "Okay, I'm off." With a curt little nod, he jogged off toward the building, carrying the milk pail in both gloved hands. Kieli watched his retreating back with a smile. He sort of reminded her of Harvey as a kid: a redhead with a little bit of a sassy streak. Well, she suddenly had time on her hands now that her job had been stolen...She relaxed her hands from the pail-handle shape they'd been frozen in and walked over to Harvey.

"Whatcha looking at?"

After a long pause during which Harvey kept staring at nothing for a while, he shifted his not-quite-focused gaze to her. But he still just looked vaguely up at her with a blank expression on his face, so Kieli got persistent.

"Harvey," she asked again, "whatcha looking at?"

"...Ah."

This time he finally showed a response, as though he'd only just now realized somebody was talking to him.

"A bird." His face softened a little as he answered, turning his

gaze back to the empty air. Kieli followed its path, raising her face to the sky, too. A pale, sand-colored bird almost the exact same color as the sky was soaring overhead with its wings spread wide.

“Can you see it?”

Harvey smiled wryly and shook his head. “I was...following. The sound of it moving,” he said. It came out a little stilted, as if he was stringing the words together with an effort.

They’d been here several days now. Harvey spent a lot of his time like this, sitting somewhere outside with the broken radio and casually listening to the sounds of nature. From what Kieli could tell, he could hardly see at all anymore.

“It must be one of those migratory birds from the Sand Ocean. I remember you were the one who told me those birds only had one leg, Harvey,” Kieli said as she watched it circle in the sky. Maybe it’d gotten separated from its flock; it was the one and only bird who’d made a home here. The kind of one-legged bird that normally migrated across the Sand Ocean. Once, a long time ago, the Corporal had explained to her that they almost never slept: they only stopped on the end of a sand-proofing wall or the tip of a ship’s sail to rest their wings for a while before taking right back off again.

“Harvey, do you like those birds? You watched them a lot while we were on the ship, too.”

“Huh...did I?” Harvey tilted his head with an ambiguous expression on his face. After another long pause, he went, “Ah...” It was a dubious answer that didn’t really tell Kieli whether he’d remembered or not.

Harvey was like this all the time lately. He loafed idly all day long. All the force had gone out of him, or more like his biological reactions had gone really weak. When she talked about the past with him, a lot of the time he could remember only bits and pieces of it, and sometimes he even forgot things she’d said just a few minutes ago. It was just as though he were following in the Corporal’s footsteps, and it made Kieli very uneasy.

She remembered that time in the capital, when he’d abruptly just stopped moving like a puppet with its strings cut. When the ghost girl had guided her to touch the inside of Harvey’s horribly hurt body, his battered left optic nerve had eaten its way deeper into his brain than it should, and it’d looked as if it was still encroaching on the rest of his nerves.

Back then, though, he'd still had the will to live. That silent boy inside of Harvey had fought for all he was worth to keep him intact, so that he could settle everything he needed to take care of.

But what would happen when everything binding Harvey to this world was settled...?

"Kieli." A quiet voice broke into her thoughts. Harvey's eyes were still fixed vaguely ahead of him. He murmured without looking at Kieli, "What can you see? From here. Tell me."

Kieli pulled herself back together and smiled, sitting down next to Harvey and wrapping her arms around her knees. The far-northern wind stroked her cheeks. It felt chilly, but milder than usual today, really. The brisk, dry air and the feel of the wall at her back were comfortable.

"I can see a flock of quee. Quee look like a horse and a sheep at the same time, but their fur is stiffer and warmer-looking, and they're really gentle and cute. The women are out milking them. The kids are chasing them around. One of the quee is sitting down, and little Litta is taking a nap leaning up against its stomach. She's always sleeping, isn't she? And past them are the quee shed and a fence, and past that..."

Kieli let her gaze drift to the landscape beyond the fence and narrowed her eyes.

"There's a wide landscape. It goes on and on...A big red-brown wilderness spreads out to the skyline. It's almost the same color as your hair, Harvey. Some patches of ice are reflecting the sun, and it's really pretty the way they twinkle. I didn't know there was a place this beautiful on this planet..." Kieli broke off there. She turned to look at Harvey next to her. Harvey was sitting with his head hanging, his face buried between his knees.

"What's wrong? Do you feel sick?" she asked him, leaning her face in close. Harvey shook his head without lifting it from his knees. She heard a low mumble coming from in between them.

"I was just thinking, there are still places like that..."

He was covering his face with his hand, and his voice came out muffled.

"That there's still a wider world that I don't know. This planet is bigger...I thought I'd walked every inch of the world. But there's still a path left that goes on farther than I ever thought, and the places I thought I knew are so small..."

Kieli listened closely to his scratchy voice. A single clear drop of

water plopped down from between Harvey's knees and soaked into the dry, cracked wilderness ground.

"And it just...made me feel happy..."

His back trembled slightly. His head was still bowed; Kieli wound her arms around him and hugged tightly as she agreed. "Yeah...Yeah."

She choked the words over and over.

Kieli was sure this man—this man who was happy the planet was bigger than he'd thought, who was happy there was a wider world he didn't know, who was so willing to say so—must have loved this planet more than anyone else. This planet had hounded him for so long, had *hurt* him without allowing him to either live or die. It'd been completely used up by the War until it was just a wilderness that would never give birth to anything again, and even still it had been precious to him. He could still feel that way.

Kieli loved him with all her heart, and that was the way he thought. That was the man she'd fallen in love with.



He could hear children playing.

"Over here, over here! You're going the wrong way!"

"Hey, It! This way!"

A kid blindfolded with a bandanna was running around chasing the other kids, who clapped their hands to lead him. Harvey guessed it was that "blind man's bluff" game.

"Corporal, can you hear them...?"

The radio never let out even a scrap of static anymore, but Harvey still found himself talking to it. Old habits died hard. He had no past of his own, and there was almost nothing of the view in front of him left in his memory, but he was sure the Corporal would've waxed nostalgic if he'd seen it. This place smelled like the countryside before the War. It was something completely apart from both the pre-War metropolises' high-level civilization and the dilapidation of post-War towns. Someplace utterly simple, where the flow of time was slow.

As he listened to the children's voices, another scene gradually rose up in his mind's eye and overlapped with them.

A golden-haired girl, a slate-eyed boy, and another boy a little

older than them, a tall one with sandy hair. The sandy-haired one wore the blindfold. He wandered in uncertain circles with both hands outstretched in front of him, and the golden-haired girl and the slate-eyed boy jeered as they ran around him. In truth they'd all been different ages before they died, and they'd all lived in different eras and different places, too. What Harvey was seeing could never have happened in reality. If they'd lived normal lives and died normal deaths, the people these children became would never have crossed paths.

The boy playing "It" grabbed the boy with the slate eyes and lifted him up high while he flailed and squawked. The golden-haired girl laughed hysterically at the sight.

It's all finished now...

Those words came home to him again as he sighed.

Each of them had resolved their respective lives. After all, that's the issue they'd all had to resolve, the score they'd had to settle: ending what hadn't been able to end itself.

This is things working out for the best...It is, right...?

The older boy put the younger one back down on the ground and took off his blindfold. The children stopped playing and all turned to wave at Harvey at the same time, smiling at him.

Ephraim!

Come on, play with us!

called two of them innocently. The slate-eyed boy, on the other hand, scowled defiantly and said,

Fine, I guess I'll let you join us.

Harvey gave a wry smile at that. For a moment he almost found himself walking over to them. He could probably have peace if he just went over there without thinking about anything. If he could join them and play like a child, he was sure it would be fun.

He started to stand up, but then he slid back down the wall to sit down again.

"Sorry..." Harvey hung his head and buried his face between his knees, mumbling an almost silent apology to his people.

Is it okay if I stay on this side a little longer, just a little longer? Is it okay if I stay with Kieli just a little longer...? I want us to really get to live in that house in Easterbury and have a quiet life like the people here do. I need only a little while. Just a little longer.

...And then I'll go over to that side, too, all right? Oh, except we don't have souls anymore, so I guess there's no "that side" for us, huh?

"Ahaha..."

A tired, self-mocking laugh escaped him. He was awfully sleepy, and his thoughts started getting fragmented. His back slipped further along the wall and his body sank to the ground. The inside of his head felt awfully heavy, but it felt so good at the same time that he almost gave in to it.

Before long the time would come for him to settle that score with himself, too. The time would come for him to meet his end.

But...

If there's anyone on this planet with the power to perform miracles, please let me stay with her just a little longer...

When she finished helping Ner's mother make cheese and came back outside, Kieli stopped short at the sight of Harvey crashed out on the ground below their window. "Harvey!" She ran up to him and crouched down, picking up the radio that had slid off his lap before cradling his limp head.

"Mm..."

Harvey opened his eyes and blinked slowly once. Twice.

"I almost fell asleep..."

Kieli gave a sigh of at least temporary relief at the sound of his groggy mumble. *That scared me...*

"How about you come sleep in the bedroom?"

"Okay..."

Kieli lent him her shoulder and tried to haul him to his feet, but even as he was agreeing with her, Harvey leaned his head on her arm and let his eyes flutter sleepily closed again. His copper-colored hair had grown out quite a bit; when the wind stirred it, it fell across his sunken cheek with its sore like iron rust.

Just when she thought he really had fallen asleep, Harvey lifted his lids again just slightly and let his unfocused gaze wander around

the ground nearby as he spoke in a halting, scratchy voice. It was the same old voice Kieli loved. The low voice that rumbled in his throat a little and always sounded a little offhanded.

“I’m really sleepy, but I haven’t slept in so long. I’m kinda scared...I feel like...I’ll have weird dreams...”

Kieli combed her fingers through the coppery hair resting on her arm and leaned her face down close to his ear. “I’ll stay right next to you. I’ll keep watch and make sure you don’t have any scary dreams. So it’s okay for you to sleep...”

She touched the back of his hand where it lay slack on the ground. It still had the awful sore like iron rust that matched the one on his cheek, and it had been so wrecked for so long, but it had hung in there and kept on working anyway. It was exactly like that boy—just as slim and frail as the copper-haired boy who’d worked so hard with his young hands to put the world back together. Kieli wrapped it in her own and squeezed.

“But, Kieli...I want to...stay with you still...”

His long, bony fingers gripped hers. Kieli flipped his hand over so that they were palm to palm and squeezed back tightly. She brushed his ear lightly with her lips as she whispered, “I am with you. I’m right here with you. You’ve worked hard enough, Harvey. You’ve worked hard all this time, and it’s enough. You can sleep now. I’ll be here, so it’s okay...”

Her voice shook with tears. One tear spilled over and fell down to Harvey’s face, sliding down his cheek just as if it were his.

She couldn’t tell him to hang in there any longer. It was all right for him to stop working his wrecked hand and wrecked body so hard now. He could sleep as long as he wanted to. Because from now on it was her turn to lead him by the hand. *It’s okay; I won’t let go. I never have, and I never will.*

The cold, brisk northern spring wind, the voices of the kids playing in the pasture, and the peaceful lowing of the quee washed gently over them from the distance.

“...eli, I...”

His mostly blind copper and dark brown eyes both looked up at her, and he gave a faint, soft smile. His lips moved just a fraction, murmuring something. Kieli leaned down and bent her ear to his broken voice.

“...glad I met you. I’m glad I lived in this age...And for this planet that let me meet you, let me live long enough to meet you...”

everybody who ever protected you...this whole planet. I..."

This whole planet. I...

Those were his final words.

And with that, he closed his eyes as serenely as a child safe in his own bed with his mother watching over him, and his breath evened out into the rhythm of sleep.



That day, it seemed the long-overdue spring had finally come to the capital here in the north of the continent. Soft rays of sunlight filtered down from between the thin, sandy clouds, and the wind carried spring's mild scent. Life was sure to get easier for the people in the shelters when the cold eased, which excited Julius, too.

"Dad!"

He caught sight of his father standing under the tented roof of the Security Forces' makeshift headquarters, having some sort of meeting with an aide. When Julius ran over, his father turned away from the map they were poring over and looked at him.

"We've started handing out soup at the shelters. It's warm today, so it looks like we've got enough blankets, too."

"Good, thanks. You've been working hard."

Julius smiled and shook his head at the thanks. "It's nothing." He'd recently assumed command when they put him in a position of responsibility for things like taking care of the wounded and distributing supplies in the shelters. He finally had a job where he could be useful. He was busy running around all the time, but his days were fulfilling.

"But..." The way he hedged a little bit before going on made his father give him a funny look. "The Elders apparently don't like the soup, and they're being kind of a pain about it..."

"Those stubborn old coots," his father muttered caustically. He shrugged at Julius and sighed. "If they don't want to eat it, they don't have to. We're short on provisions anyway. Leave them be."

"But..." Julius winced. There were sure to be complaints if they

did *that*, too.

"I'll go talk to them." A voice suddenly came to his rescue. Father Sigri was standing next to him, wearing a faint, wry smile. His right arm was finally out of the sling. "We must respect the elderly; you know that."

"Funny, I seem to remember you saying, 'Forget about a few senile old fools who were practically dead anyway.'"

Father Sigri shrugged off his dad's light jab equally lightly. "They're just a bunch of old folks now, with no authority and no power. We young people ought to be charitable," he answered. His tone was friendly, but the remark itself was just as casually caustic as Julius's father's had been earlier. The two men shared a smirk.

A week had gone by since the day the mysterious decay phenomenon attacked capital headquarters.

The monsters roaming the capital had been swallowed up by the wave of decay and turned to part of some mysterious substance like the roots of a giant tree, and the Church headquarters, where a thicket of steeples from the past civilization had stood, was thoroughly transformed. Now it was a little grove completely overtaken by great petrified trees.

Julius looked up at it, visible farther up in the mountain range from the slums in the lower strata of the capital. Against the sandy sky, a little warmer now that spring was beginning, there were the spires: all covered in decades' worth, no, centuries' worth of thick red rust. They'd appeared out of nowhere here in the center of the planet, and yet looking at them, it seemed so clear that they'd been there since the genesis of the world long ago—guardian spirits that had watched over their planet for thousands and thousands of years.

The Church officials and pilgrims who'd been caught up in the crisis had evacuated headquarters and were temporarily living in shelters built down here, where there hadn't been too much damage. It was the poor people in the slums who'd helped them. They'd readily welcomed high-level priests and common pilgrims alike, and shared their goods, too, even though they couldn't have had enough for themselves to begin with. It was the exact reverse of what had happened in the tumultuous time after the War, when the Church had shared its goods with the poor and helped the cities rebuild, but Julius wanted to believe that the two phenomena were rooted in the same desire to help one another—that all human

hearts held the same basic kindness deep down.

A lot of people said that a girl's voice had guided their escape from the maze that headquarters had become, or that they'd seen a girl guiding them out. Some of them even said she was the Holy Mother and offered her prayers of thanks.

However...they still didn't know what had become of that girl, or of the redheaded Undying Julius knew must have been with her. Rescue teams had made a sweep of the capital, picking up anyone who'd been left behind, but those two remained unaccounted for.

Father Sigri gave Julius's shoulder a light slap. The Elder was probably thinking about the same thing he was as they both looked up at headquarters.

"Well," his father said lightly, "shall we start rebuilding?"

"Yes..." Father Sigri agreed with a wry smile. "Now then, I suppose I'll go talk to the old folks," he joked, and walked easily off toward the provisional headquarters. Julius stared. *So even Father Sigri makes jokes sometimes.* It was kind of an odd thought.

"You and I will only keep getting busier, too," his father said with a laugh, stretching and cracking his neck left and right. His expression wasn't tired, though—in fact, his face glowed with excitement like a child's. His father was always most alive at times like these. He didn't like being forced by the authorities to walk down a boring, flat road nearly as well as taking the lead himself and carving a new road. Julius took pride in his father for that.

"Julius."

"Hmm?"

"Do you think there's no god on this planet?"

"Mmm..."

Julius shielded his eyes against the hazy sunlight overhead and looked up at headquarters for a while, thinking. At this point he honestly didn't know whether there was a mystical power in those headquarters, or whether there had been once. Still...

"I don't know whether it's God or not...but I *do* think there must be some power watching over this planet. Maybe it's an imperfect power; maybe it's warped and unfair. Maybe it's an unstable power that isn't guaranteed to help you when it counts... But..."

As he answered, Julius's face broke into a smile. A big one that welled up from deep inside and took over his whole face.

But there's definitely a power out there that can perform miracles.

Julius believed in that. In miracles, just like the one two years ago that had brought the two of them back after they'd been stranded in the Sand Ocean.

"It has to be there, because I know the planet has to be protecting those two..."

And then he couldn't take it anymore; his legs just started moving. He took off running up the slope, waving wildly.

There were two figures, one tall and one short, making their way down the slope from headquarters. The smaller one, a girl, caught sight of Julius and waved back at him. Walking slowly hand in hand toward him against the backdrop of the rusty petrified forest, they seemed to sparkle in the sand-colored sunshine like new life rising up out of the end of the world.

Julius waved his arm hard and shouted, sending up a prayer that his voice would reach them even though they were still far away.

"Welcome home!"

His voice was whisked far off into bright sand-colored sky.

THE DEAD SLEEP ETERNALLY IN THE
WILDERNESS

When she pushed open the glass door of the second-story porch, the mild breeze of an early-spring morning caressed her cheeks.

She reached both arms above her head and stretched, taking a deep breath and inhaling the green smell of the potted herbs on the porch. The smell of breakfasts being made by the families in the other homes in the neighborhood wafted her way on the smog from their houses' exhaust pipes. "Mm-mmm...Okay."

Now that her first ritual of the day was over, she made her plans for today as she checked on the potted plants. It would probably take a while yet before she could open up shop, but the plants were coming along well. She'd water them and then go pick up the milk and start making her own breakfast. She had to work on setting up the shop she planned to open downstairs, and since the place used to be a clinic, there were so many neglected rooms that she hadn't even finished cleaning half of them yet. Really, she had so much to do, there couldn't ever be enough hours in the day. It would probably be like this for a while, with no time for her to worry about anything she didn't have to.

Which meant she didn't have to think about all the things she'd lost...so she felt sort of glad that these busy days would go on for a while longer.

Brrrm brrrm...

A three-wheeled motorcycle approached in a clamor of fossil-fuel engine noise and parked below the porch. The young deliveryman said a mechanical "Good morning" as he brought the morning's milk over and left it in front of the house.

"Good morning," Kieli answered from upstairs, but the deliveryman ignored her. With a wary glance at her doorstep, he turned his bike around and hastily rode off to his next stop.

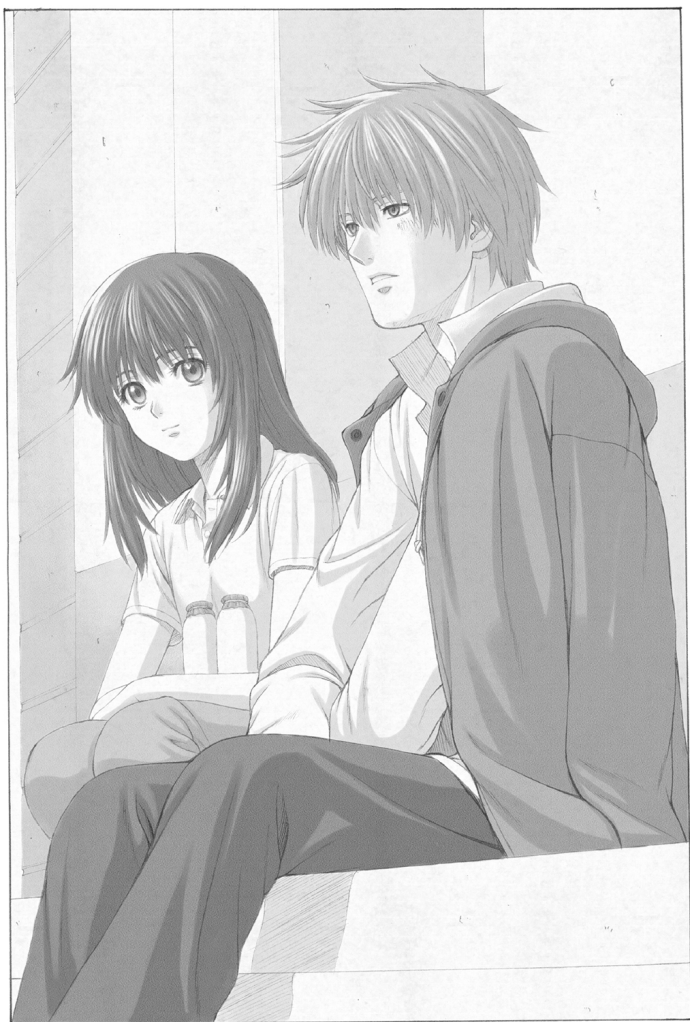
When Kieli leaned out over the porch rail and looked down, she saw a redheaded man in a plain, thin shirt sprawling barefoot on the steps by the front door. "Oh, look at you!" Kieli grumbled to herself, exasperated. "Not dressed for the cold, not even wearing shoes..." She whirled around and went back into the house.

She jogged down the steps, grabbed the man's jacket from its peg on the wall of the entryway, and went outside. Draping the jacket over his shoulders, she said, "Good morning. You're up early today."

She peeked over his shoulder at his face as she spoke. There wasn't even a flicker of a response. He just sat there with his slightly dirty feet sprawling in front of him and stared vaguely at the sky. There was no way of telling from his lackluster expression whether he didn't register Kieli's voice at all, or did register it but just wasn't showing any reaction. It didn't matter which it was, though; even when she knew he wouldn't answer, Kieli kept on striking up conversations with him just the way she always had.

Now she only smiled at him before she left him for the moment to put away the new milk bottles. *Hmm, what should I make for breakfast? I'll have my eggs scrambled, and I'll make a salad of herb leaves and chickpeas, and...oh, I know, maybe I'll have milk tea today.*

As she was working out the menu, something suddenly struck her, and she turned back to the man.



Wait, maybe...

Kieli went back and crouched on the stoop next to him, still cradling the bottles in her arms. Faint morning sunlight shone on his left cheek. His gaze was pointed toward the southern sky. Now that Kieli thought about it, he'd been looking south for a few days straight now.

"Oh...Yeah, it's gotten warmer and everything. We have to go pretty soon, huh?"

She smiled at his profile. "Hey, want to do it today?"

I'll just water the plants, and then I'll take a day off from cleaning house and getting the shop ready. I'll have a sandwich for breakfast, and put milk tea in the canteen, and pack a bag for an overnight trip, and then I'll get him to actually wear some shoes...Where did I put those old worn-out work boots, again? Lately he just walks around in his bare feet if I take my eyes off him for a second.

Today they'd go on a journey together, even if it wasn't a very long one. It had been a while.

Let's go deliver the Corporal today.



The gently sloping rock fault came into view up ahead, sprawling beyond the rusty abandoned track. They headed straight along the track toward it and asked the truck to stop for them near the dark mouth of the tunnel that opened into the center of the rock fault.

"Thank you very much, sir. We appreciate it," Kieli told the driver politely, opening the door of the passenger seat. Thankfully, the truck driver they'd hitched a ride with at the transfer station was a very kind man, and he'd detoured out of his way to bring them to the entrance of this abandoned tunnel.

Now he was leaning toward the passenger seat and asking amiably, "Are you sure you only need me to take you this far? Your friend here is sick, right?"

"It'll be all right. We'll walk slowly," Kieli answered with a smile. Then she turned to the young man sleeping against her and lightly shook his shoulder. "Harvey, we're here," she said into his ear. "Can you get up?" He stirred enough to crack his eye open a little and blink. Kieli gave him her hand, and they got down from the truck together. He still seemed half-asleep.

As soon as his feet hit the ground, his left foot dragged and he tottered a little, so Kieli hastily got her arms around him to hold him up.

"Are you okay? Do you think you can walk?"

No voice answered her question. The young man kept on gazing at nothing, his expression vague.

During the short week or so they'd spent as guests of the far-northern tribe, Harvey's condition had gotten worse. He'd gradually stopped responding to her when she talked to him, until at this point the most he ever did was raise his eyes reflexively, and he didn't even do that very often. He never spoke, either. He usually either spent the whole day staring in some direction or other and spacing out, or slept the whole day away. But still, even with his left foot dragging a little on every step, he walked with Kieli when she tugged his hand.

Right now, that was enough. Kieli figured his mind and heart had worked hard for a very long time, and now they were taking a little while to sleep. She didn't know if he'd recover someday or if he'd just stay this way, and she didn't know how much longer he had left to live, either...but whatever the answers were, all Kieli could do was slowly and patiently tug him along by the hand.

It didn't matter how long this would take. She intended to keep on tugging his hand for as long as he was living and breathing beside her.

"I'll be coming back this way tomorrow, so I'll pick you up if you want."

"Really? That would be wonderful."

Kieli decided she'd take the driver up on his kind offer without making a fuss about it. It was kind of a long way back to the transfer station if they had to walk the whole way. She shouldered the bag she'd left on the passenger seat and then hung the silent radio around her neck.

"Take these. It still gets pretty cold at night." And with that, he started offering her blankets, flashlights, canteens, and all kinds of

things. Kieli already had everything they needed, and if they tried to carry too much more it would be hard to even make it to the winch tower on foot at all, so as grateful as she was, she politely declined.

“Harvey?”

By the time she had thanked the driver again and told him good-bye, Harvey was no longer next to her anymore, or even nearby. When she looked around, a little panicked, she found him wandering away down the train track. He was making silly childish gestures with his hand, reaching out to the empty air and trying to grab something invisible. He looked exactly like a little boy chasing a bug. And then he tripped on one of the railroad ties and fell right over. Flat on his face.

“Ack! Harvey!” Kieli had let her bag slip from her shoulder; she hiked it back up as she sprinted over to him. “Are you okay?”

Dropping to her knees and peering at his face, Kieli blinked. Harvey had his eyes closed and he was pressing one ear to the rail, scraping his cheek like a child in the process.

It was as though he was listening to the land. To the planet’s heartbeat.

“Harvey...?”

Kieli didn’t know whether he’d responded to his name or if it had nothing to do with her at all, but after a few moments, Harvey’s lids lifted a little, and he looked up at her and gave a faint, just a very faint, smile.

Something warm and sad soaked into her heart like tears.

His responses were as muted as ever, but she was certain he could hear everything. Kieli believed that. The sound of her voice and the clamoring songs of the cities—the rowdy voices of the sellers in the marketplace, the noisy belching of the exhaust pipes on the three-wheeled bikes, the boilers sending up smog from all the houses—and also the sound of the land here in the wilderness, and the sound of the dry wind with its faint white noise, and the endless push and pull of the sand in the Sand Ocean.

He heard all the songs of all the people and all the life on this planet, every moment. Kieli knew it.

She took his hand and helped him stand up, and then she waved good-bye to the truck and the two of them began walking south down the abandoned track, hand in hand. The radio swayed from side to side at her chest in time with their footfalls. Thin

shadows of mismatched lengths fell softly on the track as they walked toward the mine-yard graves, where the fallen soldiers slept eternally, to keep their final promise.

...Kieli, I'm glad I met you.

Harvey's last words had worked their way so deeply into Kieli's heart that they were still echoing there all this time later.

Words for this planet, this withered planet with only sand and wilderness and smog and barren mines and all the other scars of an old war left to it, from the man who loved it anyway.

Kieli, I'm glad I met you.

I'm glad I lived in this age.

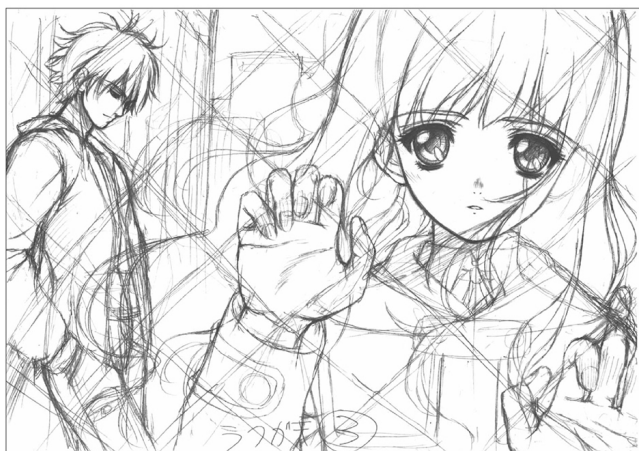
And for this planet that let me meet you, let me live long enough to meet you. Everybody who ever protected you.

This whole planet.

I'm grateful for it all now.

FINISHED





COLLECTION OF INITIAL
ROUGH CHARACTER SKETCHES

Yukako Kabei
Shunsuke Taue



【KIELI】

<Taue> This is Kieli from the epilogue at the end of Volume 1. It really brings back memories! But when I look at these old roughs now, I feel pretty embarrassed.

<Kabei> The illusory Volume 1 Epilogue Outfit. The way her jeans are tucked into her boots is so cute. I remember I asked Taue-san to make her hair a little shorter for Volume 2.





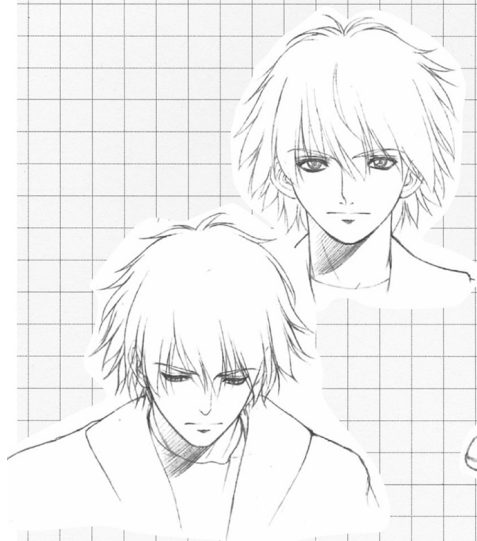
<Taue> This one undeniably has an element of “Who is this?”...but still, Kieli is a character I can still look at old roughs of without getting too upset... maybe the only character...

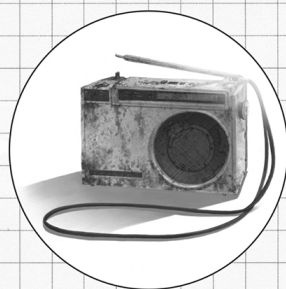
<Kabei> The drawing above is a rough sketch for the Volume 1 cover. Her legs were a bit less exposed in the finished product... Looking back on it now, maybe this would’ve been okay as is...?!

【HARVEY】

<Taue> Eep! Yes, I know what you're thinking... *sweat drop* I ended up having a rough time with Harvey to the bitter end.

<Kabei> I selfishly made you adjust all kinds of things about Harvey, didn't I? Once I asked you to try giving him some stubble... looking back on it, why did I want stubble...?





【THE CORPORAL】

<Taue> The Corporal was the easiest of all the characters to draw. The model for the possessed radio was an old radio I had at home.

<Kabei> The Corporal, helmeted version. I gave the okay for the Corporal's design on the very first go! The radio is surprisingly heavy, so Kieli has chronically stiff shoulders. (←lies)



【BECCA】

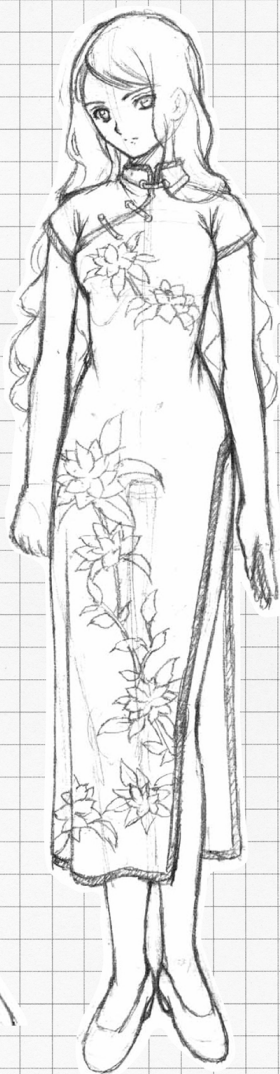
<Taue> Becca's really popular, isn't she! I drew a lot of roughs of different expressions for her; I would've liked to do those for the books, too.

<Kabei> When I was writing the Volume 1 manuscript, I never imagined Becca would be this popular... I'd intended for her to be a one-off character...

【BEATRIX】

<Tae> I put a lot of energy into drawing her, having arbitrarily decided “She’ll be in charge of the sex appeal factor!” As I recall, it took quite a long time to settle on her hairstyle.

<Kabei> The one who gave the order “Put her in a China dress! With a high slit!” was me... I remember asking for a few different sample patterns for the front of her hair.





【JOACHIM】

<Taue> These are the very first roughs of Joachim that I drew. His outfit somehow ended up sort of fantasy-like, huh?

<Kabei> The psycho expression in the one on the right is awesome. Joachim ended up rivaling Harvey in popularity by the end.

【JUDE】



<Tae> It's a shame I never got the chance to draw him for the books. (Well, I did draw him "after.")

<Kabei> The illusory Jude rough sketch. Unbeknownst to our readers, we had this sketch of him as an attractive older man.

【SETSURI】



<Tae> I bet if I unbound her hair, she'd turn into Kieli. Differentiating characters is hard...

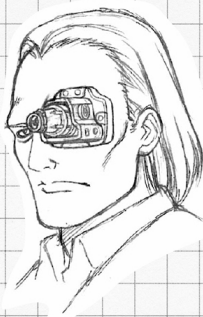
<Kabei> To tell you the truth, I had some discarded ideas for her... like making her the leader of an anti-Church resistance group...

【JULIUS】

<Tae> Short pants! There was no point in coming up with a design for his clothes underneath the jacket, but I ended up doing it anyway.

<Kabei> Julius from Volume 2! To tell you the truth, at this point I hadn't decided exactly how old he was yet.





【DANIIL】

<Taue> How does he get that device to stick over his left eye? It's a superior product that makes his combat effectiveness plain to see. (←giant lie)

<Kabei> I remember making Taue-san work very hard for me on the device over his left eye... saying things like, "Make it more lavish!"

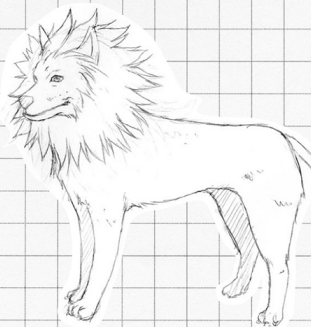
【THE ASSISTANT】

<Taue> As I'm sure some of you are noticing right around now, machines are a weak point for me.

<Kabei> As I'm sure some of you are noticing right around now, I'm a weird machine freak, sorry...

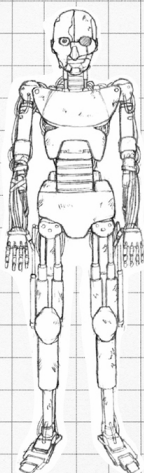


【MANE】



<Taue> For some reason, when I drew Mane I found myself wanting to shout "Lion-Maruuuu!" (There was no particular meaning to it.)

<Kabei> A very early version of Mane. Taue-san adjusted his mane a million times for me...



【THE ROBOT】

<Tae> I was told that it would become Harvey's right arm later, so I remember putting a lot of effort into its arms.

<Kabei> I have memories of bringing him reference images of C3PO from *Star Wars* and telling him, "It should be like this!"

【THE DOLLS IN THE TRIANGLE HATS】

<Tae> The head-to-body-size ratio is different here than in the final version. It looks a little creepy in this sketch, doesn't it...?

<Kabei> I remember writing the scenes like the dolls playing on the sand-proofing wall as they came to me, without thinking too much.



<Tae> I jumped the gun and drew the rough on the right before I'd even gotten the specs yet, letting my imagination take me. Thus, Harvey looks 30 percent less like himself than usual.

<Kabei> I was hoping we'd have the chance to use this rough somewhere. Harvey's looking dapper, isn't he?



Comments by Shunsuke Taue, *Kieli* Illustrator

Um, hello!

This is Taue, the one who did the insert illustrations.

I'm v-very humbled to receive a space to greet you like this.

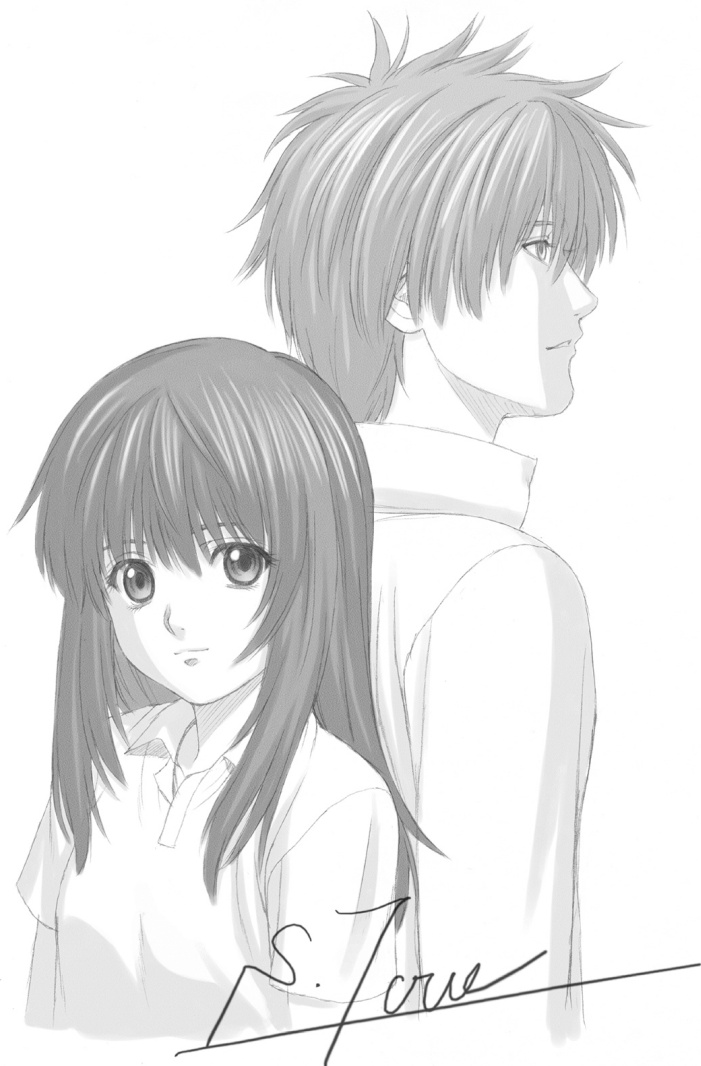
Naturally, when I read the text for the final volume I was moved, and I felt all kinds of feelings welling up in me until I'll admit that I was pretty teary-eyed.

To get ready to write this Afterword I looked over the books again from Volume 1, overcome with emotion...But my first thought was, "The art style changed too much"...I-I'm sorry! I'm really sorry! *sweat drop* I also feel like with each volume, the world of *Kieli* slowly but surely solidified in my mind. It's been a little over three years since the first volume, and I've had the opportunity to draw a lot of illustrations during that time. Since this project began I hope that I've managed to get closer, even if slowly but surely, to the image of *Kieli* that Kabei-san has, and that you, the readers, have...I hope...U-um, so, what do you think...? *nervous*

To Kabei-san, the author, my sincere congratulations! I'm so sorry you had to do the illustration checks on sloppy roughs every time. *sweat drop* Because you allowed me to work on *Kieli*, I got to draw all sorts of illustrations, and I had a really wonderful experience. As one of your many fans, I look forward to seeing more of your work in the future! And to my editor, who's done so much for me on both *Kieli* and other projects, thank you for doing so much for me! I am in your debt! And finally, to all of you who have viewed my illustrations along with Kabei-san's wonderful text, thank you very, very much!

I'll be thrilled if we have the chance to meet again one day.

Shunsuke Taue



AFTERWORD

My curry ran out yesterday, so starting today I'll have to go back to thinking about my meals every day, which is a real pain. Occasionally one of my readers will write in their letters, "Have you been eating properly? I almost want to come over and cook for you," and I find myself pretty seriously thinking, "P-please come!" (No, no, of course the kind thoughts are more than enough...)

Hello, I'm Yukako Kabei. My survival abilities are somewhat low.

While I was writing the middle volumes of the series, I was looking forward to writing the Afterword to the last volume, and I know I thought up all kinds of material for it, but now that the time has actually come, nothing's really coming to me. I can't remember what I was planning to write...At this point, I don't exactly feel a sense of accomplishment—or rather, the fact that it's over doesn't even exactly feel real yet. Or rather, I've already rushed into brainstorming for my next project, so I don't have the time to be giving myself up to deep emotions...O-oh, so that's the problem.

On a different subject, my favorite part of a novel to write is the epilogue. That doesn't mean I write the epilogue first or anything; it's that I enjoy taking my time writing the epilogue at the end after making it through the process of getting there, the way you enjoy a dessert you've been looking forward to after you finish dinner.

Now that I've finished writing the last volume, from my perspective as author I feel as if this whole volume, and the second half in particular, has been me writing one long, long epilogue. I'd decided on the ending quite a long time ago, so this is where I've been working all this time to get to. Many people have told me that the signature line I've been using ever since I randomly slapped it together in the Volume 1 Afterword "neatly sums up the story," and hearing that from other people was what really convinced me that "Oh! I guess that's true" for the first time, but yes—it's "a story about a girl with a complicated personality and a man with a tiresome personality, getting together and being separated, and about a man who's tired of living finding meaning in life again"—

and I think I managed to end it that way.

Many people assisted me during the process of writing this long nine-volume story. I give all of them my heartfelt thanks. To tell you the truth, back when I was a reader but not a writer, I was one of those people who thought, “The acknowledgments in the Afterword are just private notes that don’t have anything to do with the reader, so they’re boring and pointless!” But now that I’m in a position to write Afterwords like this myself, I know that I’ve received support from a great many people both on and off the job as I write, and there’s no place to convey my gratitude except the Afterword, so in the end I’ve been using this space to say my thanks every time.

First and foremost, thank you to my editor, who graciously took me on, and to Taue-san, who has worked as my partner since the first volume. Let’s all keep doing our best.

And I give my very finest thanks to all of you readers who have supported this series. Fortune has smiled on me over and over in giving me the opportunity to carry this story all the way to the final volume, and I was even blessed with radio drama and comic adaptations and merchandising. As an author, I feel very honored.

W-wow, I really can’t think of a single interesting thing to say. I’m sorry I’m writing only this normal, serious stuff. I mean, I do know there aren’t any rules saying that people have to write interesting things in Afterwords, but still.

I pray that this story will stick with you in some small way and live on in a corner of your heart.

And if you were to take notice of Yukako Kabei’s future writings as well, that would make me happier than anything.

I hope to be able to see you again in another story.

Yukako Kabei

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